

Biggles

TAKES THE CASE

Some problems solved by
Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth, C.I.D.,
and his Air Police.

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



Biggles

TAKES THE CASE

Some problems solved by
Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth, C.I.D.,
and his Air Police.

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



Biggles

TAKES THE CASE

Some problems solved by Air Detective-Inspector
Bigglesworth, C.I.D., and his Air Police

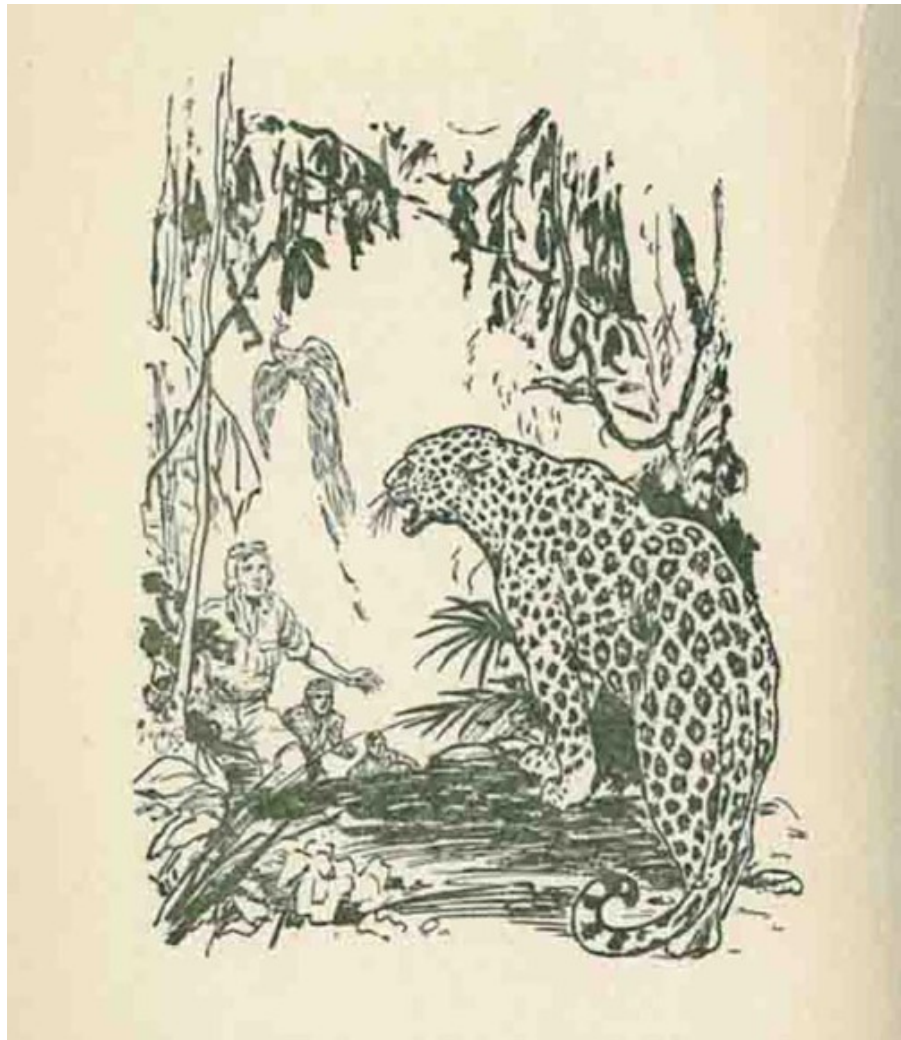
By

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



Illustrated by Stead

HODDER & STOUGHTON LIMITED



SKYWAY ROBBERY "I'll come right down, Sir." Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth, of the Special Air Section, New Scotland Yard, replaced the receiver of his departmental telephone, and leaving the work on which he had been engaged with his assistants, walked down a corridor to the office of his chief, Air Commodore Raymond. He knocked and, without waiting for a reply, entered.

The Air Commodore was not alone. He had a visitor, and, as Biggles saw at a glance, an unusual one. It was a slim, brown-skinned boy of about fifteen or sixteen years of age.

His dress was that of an ordinary British schoolboy, but there was in

his deportment none of the nervousness that might have been expected in the circumstances. From the chair in which he sat his dark eyes explored Biggles's face with a calm, thoughtful confidence.

The Air Commodore rose from his desk. "This, Your Highness, is Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth, the officer who may be able to help you."

Turning to Biggles the Air Commodore completed the introduction. "This is His Highness, Prince Agra Khan, son and heir of the late Rajah of Malliapore."

Biggles inclined his head. "This is a pleasure, Your Highness."

The boy rose and held out a hand. "The pleasure is mine, Sir," he replied in faultless English. "May I suggest that we forget about titles. I would rather you called me by my Christian name, as everyone does at school."

Biggles smiled faintly. "As you wish."

"Sit down, Bigglesworth," invited the Air Corn-modore. He turned to the Prince. "I suggest that you tell Detective Bigglesworth your story as you first told it to me the other day. I'll conclude with my part."

Agra nodded assent, and turning to Biggles, began : "As you will have guessed, I am from India, but I have been at school in England for three years. My father, the head of one of the smaller Indian States, was a friend of the British, and anxious for me to have a British education ; which is why I am here. Now as you know, there have recently been great changes in India following the withdrawal of British control. It was rather sudden, and not knowing quite what was going to happen next, some of the Indian Princes took the precaution of sending their most valuable heirlooms, those that were portable, to England for safe custody. For the most part these consisted of jewels collected over many years, sometimes centuries. With the country all upset it was not always easy to know how to transport such objects in safety, but as you may have heard, most people hired aeroplanes if they were available."

Biggles nodded. "I remember reading about it."

"That was the course taken by my father," continued Agra. "He was a sick man at the time ; in fact, he was dying, and for that reason perhaps did not exercise as much discretion in the choice of the pilot as the circumstances demanded. It may be that he thought he was safe in employing a British Air Transport Company that was operating in India at the time, advertising itself under the name of Transjungle Airways.

Anyhow, he got in touch with them and a plane was sent down. Five boxes of jewels were put on board with instructions that they were to be flown straight to England where arrangements had been made for their reception.

They did not arrive. The plane took off and has not been seen since—at least, not on the ground. I think the shock of this hastened my father's end, because the jewels represented his entire fortune."

"Were they insured ? " put in Biggles.

"Unfortunately, no. There was no time for that. Of course, everything possible was done in India to find the plane, but so far these efforts have produced no result. For me it is a serious matter because, although I might remain a Prince, I should be a pauper. I should have to leave the school where I am happy. In my anxiety, as soon as school broke up for the summer holidays I came here to see if the police could help. I first saw a gentleman upstairs and he sent me to Air Commodore Raymond."

"Why did you come to the police ? " asked Biggles curiously.

"Because I think the jewels were stolen."

"The plane might have developed trouble and crashed somewhere in the jungle."

Agra shook his head. "That is what they say in India, and it may be so.

But in that case, why didn't the pilot use his radio ? "

"I think I'd better take up the story from here," interrupted the Air Commodore. "As it turned out, His Highness's suspicions have had some confirmation. During the week that has elapsed since this matter was brought to my notice my enquiries have produced rather sinister results.

It seems that this concern which called itself Transjungle Airways only came into being during the temporary chaos caused by the British withdrawal. It was registered in the name of Humphrey Kelly, and possessed, as far as we know, only one aircraft, a Lancaster which was bought from surplus stores in India. There is a significance about that which won't take you long to see."

"You mean, a Lancaster, not being a commercial type, would be almost impossible to operate at a profit ? "

"Exactly. It leads to the supposition that ordinary charter work was not the purpose for which it was acquired ; that, in fact, it might have been bought for the very purpose for which it was used—the transportation of treasure, bearing in mind that a lot of this was going on at the time. It seems that when Kelly bought the Lancaster he asked for a week'

s trial to test it, which was agreed on payment of a deposit. His cheque came back dishonoured. The same with the rest of his equipment, which he got from private traders.

"

"Which means that even then he had every intention of disappearing once he had got what he wanted ? "

"It looks that way," admitted the Air Commodore. "But let us get back to facts. The Lancaster, with a crew of two, the pilot and a mechanic, arrived at Malliapore where a landing-ground had been prepared. The

boxes containing the treasure were put on board.

But before the plane could take off there occurred one of those little incidents which the cleverest of crooks could not be expected to take into account. It so happened that a member of the palace staff possessed a camera, and, quite naturally, he decided to take some snapshots of an event so unusual. One of the pictures shows the pilot and his mechanic facing the camera as they waved good-bye just prior to going on board.

Thus, we were able to have a good look at these gentlemen. They have been identified. I'll deal with the pilot first. You'll remember that he was running the charter company under the name of Kelly, but when we last knew him he was a flight-lieutenant in the R.A.F. using the name of Eustace Braunton. His last station was with the Army of Occupation in Germany, but his career ended abruptly when a court-martial found him guilty of black-market and currency activities. He was cashiered and narrowly escaped a prison sentence. On trial with him was his fitter-rigger, a certain Corporal Mailings. He was discharged with ignominy. The fitter that Braun-ton, alias Kelly, took with him to Malliapore, was none other than his previous partner in crime, ex-Corporal Mailings.

Braunton, I may say, seems to have been a good pilot, and Mailings was a mechanic of exceptional ability. The pattern of the set-up begins to take shape."

"I'll go along to the Air Ministry and have a look at their dockets," said Biggles.

"There's no need. I have their records here, also some photographs. You had better have a look at them." The Air Commodore picked up some papers that lay on his desk.

"Would I be right if I guessed that Braunton had flown Lancasters in the R.A.F. ? "

enquired Biggles.

"You would. He was flying Lankies for three years, and Corporal Mailings was on the same type. Not only did he work on the same type but he actually served in the same squadron as Braunton."

"Did this squadron serve in India by any chance ? "

"Yes," replied the Air Commodore slowly. "Braunton and Mailings were on the R.A.F.

station at Browshera, which is about four hundred miles north of Malliapore."

"Fits like a glove," murmured Biggles. "Is Browshera still used as an airfield ? "

"I don't think so. At any rate it was abandoned when we left India."

"Still, now we know why Braunton bought a Lancaster and chose India for his operations," observed Biggles. "He had had flying experience of both."

"Precisely."

Biggles thought for a moment. "How long is it since the Lancaster disappeared ? "

"Getting on for six months."

"And the jewels haven't turned up anywhere ? I mean, they haven't been offered for sale

? "

"No. Every big buyer of precious stones knows about them. The trade wouldn't touch them with a barge pole. Sooner or later someone

would recognise them—unless, of course, they were cut up."

"Then they are probably still in India," opined Biggles. "One thing is certain. They haven'

t been flown to Europe because in whatever country the machine had to land to refuel it would have to go through the Customs and Customs'

Officers, with so much smuggling going on, are pretty hot these days.

Where did Braunton base his machine ? "

"Calcutta."

"And he has never been back there ? "

"No. Everything there is just as he left it."

"Then we may assume, I think, that he has no intention of ever going back." Biggles thought again for a little while. "Braunton may be a crook," he resumed, "but that still doesn't make him immune from forced landings. In spite of all this evidence there is still a chance that he cracked up in the jungle somewhere. I'll admit that Lankies are not given to forced landings, but there is one thing about this case that strikes me as odd, to say the least of it. Let us assume that Braunton got away with the jewels. What has he done with them ? To be any use he must turn them into cash. No private individual would be able to afford to buy the lot, so they are bound to come into the market. As you said just now, that couldn't be done without someone spotting and recognising them.

Suppose Braunton has hidden them—is sitting on them somewhere. What can he hope to gain by that?"

The Air Commodore shrugged. "I've asked myself that question. Ruling out the crash theory it certainly looks as if Braunton has still got the stuff. Maybe he's waiting for the fuss to die down."

Biggles drew a deep breath. "Well, what do you want me to do about it, Sir ? "

"I want you to find these jewels," replied the Air Commodore. "There is nothing more I can do here."

Biggles smiled sadly. "I'm not a man to make difficulties, but that sounds like a tall order," he said. "India is a big place to start playing hide-and-seek."

"Very well. Find Braunton and Mailings and bring them to me. Maybe I can induce them to tell me where they have hidden the swag."

"You mean—you want me to fly out to India ? "

"Yes. You can have any equipment you need."

"Not being able to speak Hindustani, Urdu, or any other Indian dialect, I shall need an interpreter. Can you recommend one I can trust ? "

"I'll go with you," offered Agra promptly. "You can trust me. I'm on holiday and I should recognise the jewels if I saw them."

"There's something in that," put in the Air Commodore dryly.

Biggles looked doubtful. "True enough. But you're a bit young for this sort of thing. If these two men are cornered they may be dangerous."

"No more dangerous than a cornered tiger, and I've faced more than one,"

argued the Prince.

Biggles's eyes twinkled. "All right," he agreed. "Keep in touch with me and I'll tell you when I'm ready to start."

Agra's face became all smiles. "That's the best news I've heard since the jewels were lost,

" he declared.

Ten days later, a Wellington aircraft on loan from the Air Ministry, landed on the sun-parched surface of Dum-Dum aerodrome, Calcutta, and taxied ponderously to the control office. The engines died, and pilot and passengers stepped down. They were Biggles and his three assistants, Air Constables " Ginger " Hebblethwaite, Algy Lacey and Bertie Lissie—and Prince Agra.

A middle-aged man in white ducks, who had evidently been waiting, stepped forward. "

You're Bigglesworth, I think," he said holding out a hand. "I've had a signal from home to say you were on the way out and would I pass on to you all the gen about this Malliapore business that I've been able to collect. My name's Crane, of the central control room. Come into my quarters ; it's cooler and we can talk there."

"Thanks," answered Biggles, and introduced his companions.

A few minutes later, with iced drinks to hand, Crane continued :
"Now, what do you want to know ? I've done all I can do here. You ask the questions and I'll answer them as far as I'm able to."

"As he was based here, I suppose you knew this man Braunton, alias Kelly

? "

questioned Biggles.

"Well, I saw him about, but I can't say I got to know him at all well,"

replied Crane. "

Frankly I didn't like the man. Struck me as a bit of a bouncer. Thought a sight too much of himself."

"When did you last see him ? "

"The day he took off for Malliapore."

"And you have heard nothing of his Lancaster since then ? "

"I wouldn't say that exactly," returned Crane. "You see, as soon as the Lancaster was reported missing, we put out the usual broadcast to the public for information ; and, as usual, we got replies from all over the country, most of which could be discarded right away, because, as it happened, Braunton's machine was the only Lancaster in the air that day, and he couldn't be in ten places at once. Having weeded out the duds I sorted the most promising replies that remained. Here they are." Crane held up a sheet of paper. "

An Indian pilot, home on leave, reports that he saw a Lanky flying at about five thousand over his home at Lardoli. It was on a course slightly west of north.

That's important, because if this officer says he saw the Lanky he probably did see one.

As a pilot he wouldn't be likely to make a mistake."

Biggles nodded. "I agree. Where exactly is Lardoli ? "

Crane got up, and with a pointer indicated a spot on a large-scale map that almost covered one wall. "Here it is," said he. "And I'm pretty certain that's the way the Lanky went, because a Forestry Officer reported seeing a big machine at Gorrior, which is here, on the same line of flight. Further confirmation came from a Colonel Barstow who was shooting tiger a little farther to the north. He states that he heard a big plane pass over him very low, but couldn't see it on account of

the trees. He says he formed the opinion that it was in difficulties, otherwise it would hardly be flying so low over such country."

Biggles held the pointer on the line of flight thus revealed. "If that was Braunton's machine, one thing's certain," he said. "He had no idea of going to Europe."

"That's what puzzles me," declared Crane. "Where could he have been going

? "

"I've got an idea," returned Biggles. "You'll notice that a continuation of that line would cut across Browshera."

"What of it ? There's nothing there now."

A ghost of a smile crossed Biggles' face. "That may be a reason why he was making for it."

"But why Browshera ? "

"He served there once—in Lankies too. Did you know that ? "

" No, I didn't."

"He must know every yard of that airfield, the country around it, and perhaps some of the natives in the district," asserted Biggles. "What's happened to the airfield ? "

"There's nothing much there now. It was abandoned twelve months ago when the R.A.F.

pulled out. They took everything worth taking with them. There were three temporary canvas hangars and they were sold to an Indian contractor, who, I imagine, took them away. I haven't been there to

see. The administrative buildings were permanent but they'

d be left because it wouldn't pay to pull them down. They were pretty dilapidated anyhow. They're probably occupied by natives by this time."

"I take it no one has landed there lately ? " queried Biggles.

"There wouldn't be any point in it. It's not on any regular civil air route. In fact, it never was much more than an advance post built for operations against Waziristan."

"I think it's time someone had a look at it," observed Biggles thoughtfully.

"I hope you don't want me to go."

"Of course not. I'll just waffle along and give the place the once over."

Crane nodded. "I see. And what are you going to do if you find Braunton there ? "

"That," answered Biggles slowly, " depends on what else I find."

"You really think he may be there ? "

"I think probably he went there in the first place, although, frankly, I can't imagine what would keep him there until now. Still, we may learn something from the local people."

"When are you going ? "

"If you'll top up my machine while I'm having a spot of food in your canteen we'll drift along right away," decided Biggles. "It's only about a three hour's run."

"Good enough," agreed Crane.

There are few spectacles more depressing than an aerodrome after it has been abandoned for several months. Sun and storm, as well as human beings looking for anything worth taking, work their will on what is left behind, and the result, devoid of life, presents a dreary picture to the occasional visitor.

Browshera, ransacked by natives, hammered by the monsoon rains and then flayed by a torrid Indian sun, was no exception. Thus thought Ginger when he got his first glimpse of it through a side window of the Wellington.

The landing area was merely a wilderness of dust surrounded by loose tangles of barbed wire. The only thing that remained, apart from some ramshackle buildings that had once been the squadron offices, was a canvas hangar which, presumably, the contractor who had bought the salvage had not thought worth while to remove. This was understandable, for it leaned awry, and while the entrance was closed, the canvas at the rear hung in shreds. The only sign of life was provided by two native children who played in the dirt near what had once been the guardroom.

"Keep your eyes on that hangar," Biggles told Ginger, as he flew on as if he had no intention of landing. "If there's anyone there he's bound to hear us, and won't be able to resist having a look."

Hardly had the words left Biggles' lips than the canvas was parted and a man appeared, to stand still, staring, his face upturned.

"There's someone there anyway," said Ginger, sharply.

"How many people can you see ? "

"One."

"A white man ? "

"I couldn't be sure—he's some way off," answered Ginger doubtfully.

"Okay. I'm going to land. Tell the others to stay in the machine and on no account allow themselves to

be seen. If that's Braunton down there I'd rather he thought we were alone."

"Good enough."

By the time Ginger had carried out the order Biggles had brought the machine round and was gliding in to land. The wheels touched, throwing up a cloud of dust. As soon as the machine had finished its run Biggles touched the throttle again and taxied on towards the hangar.

A second man had now joined the first, and Ginger, now being comparatively close had a good look at them.

His first impression was that these were not the men they were seeking, for he had of course studied their photographs closely. The men shown in the prints had been clean-shaven, spick-and-span in white uniforms with gilt buttons as became their occupations.

The men standing outside the hangar were bearded, longhaired, ungroomed and in the filthiest of rags. They would, he thought, have passed for two prospectors who had been lost in the jungle for months. Yet, still looking as the machine drew nearer, it struck him that there was something vaguely familiar about their figures. In the photograph, Braunton had been a big blond, florid type, and Mailings a dark, slim man, with sharp features. Then Ginger realised that if these were the men they must have been at Browshera for months, living in primitive conditions, in which case they would hardly be immaculate. Apart from that, beards would help them to escape recognition.

"Leave the talking to me," said Biggles quietly, as they climbed down.

"Are these our men ? " breathed Ginger.

"I couldn't swear to it but I think so. We shall soon know."

Ginger followed Biggles to where the two men stood waiting, their backs against the canvas, eyes on the new arrivals. Their faces showed nothing of what they were thinking.

Their expressions, while not exactly hostile, were certainly not friendly, as might have been expected in the circumstances.

"Hallo there ! " greeted Biggles cheerfully. "Do you fellows happen to have any equipment handy ? "

The taller of the two answered : " Equipment ? What sort of equipment ? "

"Aircraft, of course."

"What makes you think we might have ? "

"Well, I happened to be passing, and spotting the hangar assumed that this was an airfield."

"It used to be," was the curt reply. "You must be a long way off your course. Don't you ever look at your maps ? "

"Sometimes," answered Biggles. "I reckon this must be Browshera."

"It used to be," said the tall man again. "If you knew your job," he added rudely "you'd know that Browshera was shut down long ago. There's nothing here."

"I see. In that case I must have been mistaken," said Biggles slowly.

"About what ? "

" Browshera. There was talk of opening it up again, as a servicing station. That's why—"

"When was this talk ? " interrupted the tall man. "Quite recently."

To Ginger, the silence that followed this announcement was significant.

That Biggles had a sound reason for making such a statement he did not doubt.

"I only wanted to check my compass," went on Biggles evenly. " Still, it isn't all that important. I can manage." As an afterthought he added :"

What are you fellows doing here in this out-of-the-way place ? "

"Minding our own business, mostly." This time it was the thin man who spoke.

Biggles shrugged. "All right, if that's how you feel. I thought you might like a lift somewhere."

"We're all right where we are," said the tall man. "Matter of fact, we've got a timber concession in the area and we're just having a look round."

"I see," returned Biggles. "Well, in that case, we'll be getting along.

So long."

" So long."

Biggles walked back to the Wellington. Ginger went with him, and not a word passed between them until they were in their seats with the engines idling.

"Well, that was all very satisfactory," remarked Biggles, as the machine began to move.

Contrary to Ginger's expectations the aircraft did not turn in the direction that would have been necessary for a take-off. Instead, it taxied along towards the far end of the airfield. "It's always a good thing on a strange aerodrome to have as long a run as possible," said Biggles, with a sidelong glance at Ginger.

"I don't get it," murmured Ginger.

"You will in a minute."

"But those were our men."

"Without a doubt," agreed Biggles. "Moreover, I'd bet a month's pay to a little apple that the Lanky is in that hangar."

Ginger looked surprised. "Did you see something ? "

"Yes. I saw their hands. They were filthy with oil. They've got a machine of some sort behind that canvas and they were working on it when we breezed along."

"Then why didn't you do something about it ? " demanded Ginger.

"Because it wasn't the moment," Biggles told him. "Those crooks didn't know what to make of us but they were ready for trouble. We'll tackle them when they're not, and when we've collected enough evidence to send them where they belong."

"How is running away going to help us ? " asked Ginger in a puzzled voice.

"I've no intention of running away," rejoined Biggles. "You see that patch of jungle straight ahead ? "

" Yes."

"I'm going to turn the machine close to it," explained Biggles. "As soon as we're broad-side on, so that those fellows watching from the hangar won't be able to see us get out, make a bolt for it and lie low. Take Agra with you. We may need him. I shall come with you. Algy will then take off and fly the machine back to Calcutta. I want him back here at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Now go and warn him of what we are going to do.

Tell him to move fast as soon as we're out, or our friends yonder may wonder what's going on."

"Now I get it," breathed Ginger.

Two minutes later Biggles swung the machine round in such a way as to send up a great cloud of dust. "We might as well have a smoke-screen," he remarked. "That turn should prove to Braunton and Mailings that we're just the sort of ham-fisted pilots they took us for. Down you go."

Ginger jumped and made a dash for the jungle. Agra was close behind him and Biggles brought up the rear. They all threw themselves flat as the Wellington, now in Algy's hands, kicked up an even bigger cloud of dust as it took off.

As the drone of the engines receded, Biggles led the way farther into the jungle until, finding a shady tree, he sat down. The others found places beside him.

Ginger smiled at this shrewd move. " Braunton and Mailings, seeing the machine go, will be patting themselves on the back thinking how nicely they handled the situation," he observed.

"That," said Biggles "is exactly what I am hoping.

When it gets dark we'll stroll along and see what they're doing. I don't think they're very smart. That timber concession excuse was pretty feeble."

"But wouldn't it have been better to arrest them while you had the chance

? " put in Agra, in a disappointed voice.

"The time to arrest them will be when we know where they've hidden those trinkets of yours," Biggles told him. "One false move, one whiff of suspicion of what we're after, and you'll never see them again."

"But how can you hope to find the jewels in a place like this ? " exclaimed Agra.

"Unless I've missed my guess, within the next few hours Braunton will show us where they are," said Biggles, smiling.

"Show us ! " Agra looked at Biggles incredulously. "That's what I said," replied Biggles evenly.

"But why should they ? " cried Agra.

"Because they think there is a chance of the aerodrome being re-opened, in which case the first thing they'll do is move the jewels to a safer place."

"But why should they think the aerodrome is to be re-opened ? " demanded Agra.

Biggles smiled again. "I'm afraid it was rather naughty of me but I dropped a hint to that effect when we were talking," answered Biggles.

"And from the way they looked at each other I fancied the hint went

home.

Presently we shall see. There's no hurry. We'll give them a few minutes to get settled down and then move nearer. When we do, speak quietly.

Above all, keep out of sight."

It was about half an hour later that Biggles got up, and keeping in the jungle near the perimeter of the aerodrome, began a cautious approach to the hangar. A survey of the scene had revealed that there was no one in sight. The two white men had, it was presumed, returned to the work on which they had been engaged when interrupted by the arrival of the Wellington.

About half-way to the objective there occurred an incident which had no connection with the airfield or the men on it ; but it served as a sharp reminder, to Ginger at any rate, that they were in an Indian jungle.

Without warning there was a swift crash in some scrub just ahead.

Everyone stopped, Biggles' hand flashing to his hip pocket, as with a whirr of wings a peacock rocketed into the air shedding feathers as it went. Before the watchers could move, from out of the same bushes, flicking his tail angrily, stepped a leopard. The beast stopped dead when it saw that it was not alone. For perhaps five seconds it stood rigid, with yellow baleful eyes on the invaders of its domain. Then it walked on, and after once looking back over its shoulder, disappeared into the jungle.

Ginger drew a deep breath of relief. "I'm glad I didn't step on his tail," he told Agra grimly.

Agra smiled. "I think he might object to that," said he. "Otherwise he was only concerned with stalking that bird for his dinner."

Biggles said nothing. He moved on, the others keeping close, until they were about a hundred yards from the hangar, which stood only a short distance from some scrub that fringed the jungle proper. As yet no sound came to suggest that it was occupied.

Biggles came to a halt and beckoned the others close.

"Agra," he said. "I'm going to ask you to do a little job, one which I couldn't undertake myself very well."

"Yes, what is it ? " asked Agra eagerly.

"I want you to take off your clothes, tie your shirt round your waist and do a little scouting. I am anxious to know where those men are and what they're doing.

Don't be seen if you can avoid it ; but if you are, it won't matter much because they'll take you for one of the natives. They must be used to seeing local people about. Get the idea ? "

"Perfectly," answered Agra without hesitation, and forthwith started to undress.

"If there should be any trouble come back this way," ordered Biggles.

"We'll keep an eye on you as far as it's possible."

It did not take Agra long to get ready. He completed the transformation by ruffling his hair, by which time, naturally, he looked exactly what he was, a typical Indian boy. With a smile and a wave he went on, while Biggles and Ginger sat in the shade of a tree to await his return.

He was away for so long that Biggles began to get anxious. The sun was low, and with the short Indian twilight it would only be a matter of minutes before darkness fell.

Indeed, Biggles had just raised the question of going to look for him when he returned, his white teeth flashing in a smile that indicated success.

"Well, how did you get on ? " asked Biggles, as the boy threw himself

down beside them.

"Good, I think," answered Agra. "First I went to the back of the hangar, very slowly in case anyone was there. There was no one, so I was able to have a good look. There is a plane there, a Lancaster I think, with wooden trestles under the middle to hold it up. The under-carriage seems to have been broken, and as there are many tools lying about I think it is being mended."

Biggles turned to Ginger. "So that's why they're still here," he said softly. "Either they had trouble, or made a dud landing that so damaged the under-cart that they couldn't get off again. They might even have had to go, or send someone, for spare parts. Still, that doesn't matter. The point is that they're here. Go on, Agra."

"Walking quietly, and picking up sticks as if I were collecting firewood, I went on to the buildings ; and I was passing one which seemed to be in better repair than the others when I heard a man talking. He was speaking English and I listened. I will tell you what he said as far as I can remember, although I couldn't make much sense of it. He kept saying, I don't like it.' Then somebody said, something ought to be in the ground.

Then another man, speaking with a funny accent, said they ought to leave the plane and go away together. Then the first man said, if the plane was found there, it would be known that they had been there. The second man said it would be better to set fire to the whole thing and burn it up.

Then the third man, the one who had the funny accent, said there was no need for that. He said it would be all right if they just worked on one at a time, so that they would be able to move at a moment's notice. The rest could be put away as soon as it got dark. That was all I heard, because then they started moving as if they were coming out and I had to bolt. Lying in the bushes I saw two men go to the hangar. But here is a funny thing. As soon as they had left, some sort of machine started working in the room where they had been talking. I could hear it buzzing.

That's all. Then I came back. Have I done well ? "

"Very well indeed." Biggles sat with his chin cupped in his hand for some minutes before he spoke again. "Not knowing definitely what they were talking about, it all sounds rather confusing," he said at last, "but I think I can follow the general trend of the conversation. They've taken my remark, about the airfield's being brought into service again, seriously. It's got them worried, which is understandable, because it means that they'll have to clear out of this pretty soon. Surveyors might turn up at any time and find them here. The Lancaster would be seen and recognised, and that would put them on a spot. We can assume that the machine isn't quite ready to fly, so either they've got to get it finished quickly, or abandon it. I imagine they've still got the jewels somewhere about. They won't go without them, yet to start on foot, carrying them, would be no joke. I'm puzzled about this third man, the one with the queer accent. I wonder where he fits into the picture. And the machine you heard. If it had any connection with the aircraft surely it would be in the hangar. No matter. We're getting on nicely. But I'm afraid we shan't get much further tonight. If we take our eyes off these fellows now they've got the jitters we may miss the boat after all. As soon as it gets dark we'll move into a position from where we shall be able to see everything that goes on.

We'll take turns to keep watch. Agra, you can put your clothes on again."

"I'm not infatuated with the idea of crawling about this jungle at night," remarked Ginger.

"Why not ? "

"I'm thinking about that leopard."

Biggles smiled. "I'm afraid we'll have to take a chance of Mr. Spots."

Almost as soon as the sun had sunk behind the trees that lined the far side of the desolate aerodrome deep night settled over the scene ; and with the coming of darkness the jungle came to life as nocturnal creatures, large and small, began their sorties in search of food.

Agra paid little attention to this, but Ginger, who was not without experience of tropical forests, found them disconcerting, probably

because they were sitting in the open without even a camp fire to discourage unwelcome visitors. A karker, the barking deer, could be heard not far away, and soon afterwards a sambhar belled. Then some jungle fowl began to cackle and Agra glanced in the direction.

"I fancy that's the leopard they are swearing at," remarked Biggles.

"I think it's more likely the jungle folk are telling each other about a tiger on the move,"

replied Agra calmly.

"Then I hope he doesn't take this direction for a stroll," said Ginger grimly.

"Don't worry. It wouldn't be a man-eater," Agra reassured him.

"How can you be sure of that ? "demanded Ginger.

"Because there are some Indian people living farther along the aerodrome and the children were allowed to play outside," explained Agra. "If a man-eater were in the district they would have gone, because when such a beast takes up residence my people don't dispute it with him."

"That's a crumb of comfort, anyway," muttered Ginger. "All the same, I prefer my tigers in cages."

A glim of light showing through some holes in the back of the hangar, and an occasional chink of metal on metal, revealed that Braunton and Mailings were still working on the damaged Lancaster.

Just before midnight the moon, nearly full, soared over the forest to shed a bright but mysterious light over the flat expanse of sterile earth that formed the landing-ground, and at the same time lined the edge of the jungle with distorted shadow. The night wore on, and more than once Ginger caught himself dozing. Biggles, never moving, sat

staring at the hangar. "They're certainly putting in some overtime," he remarked on one occasion.

Agra lay flat also watching.

Soon afterwards a touch on Ginger's arm from Biggles's hand brought him back to full consciousness with a start. Looking at the hangar he saw that the light had at last been put out. But another one soon appeared outside, obviously an electric torch held in the hand of one of the two men who had emerged and were now walking in the direction of the old administrative offices.

Very quietly Biggles rose to his feet. "Keep in the shadow," he breathed,

"and follow."

Reaching one of the nearest buildings, which from its size and shape Ginger thought must have been the station headquarters, the light was switched off. There was a broad flash as the door was opened and the two men went in. Thereafter only a narrow strip of light outlined the shape of a window. Biggles went on for a little way before he stopped.

"We're close enough," he whispered.

"That was the building where I heard the machine working", said Agra softly.

Silence fell, to be followed by another tedious wait. "I'd say they've gone to bed,"

muttered Ginger at last.

"Possibly," answered Biggles. "But in that case I think they'd have put the light out. I know this is all very boring but we can't afford to take a chance. Either they're up to something or having a conference. They must be in a hurry to clear out or they wouldn't have worked so late

in the hangar."

His patience was rewarded when, soon afterwards, the door was opened. In the light that streamed out two men could be seen carrying between them what looked like a black-painted, metal uniform case, a receptacle about three feet long by two feet wide and eighteen inches deep. A third figure, inside the building, was silhouetted against the light for a moment before the door was shut. The electric torch was switched on again, and to Ginger's consternation the light began moving towards the spot where they were standing.

Biggles backed swiftly into the thickest jungle and dropped flat. Ginger and Agra, needing no warning, did the same.

The two men, still carrying the box between them, drew nearer, and presently entered the jungle within a few yards of where the watchers lay, hardly daring to breathe. As they crossed a patch of dappled moonlight, Ginger noticed that one of them carried, in the hand not occupied with the box, a queer-shaped object which nevertheless looked familiar ; but for a moment he was unable to recognize it. Then he remembered. It was an entrenching tool, of the type carried by infantry soldiers.

The light, swinging from the movements of the men carrying it, went on ; but it did not go far. Biggles had just moved out of his hiding place to follow when it stopped at the foot of an exceptionally large tree. There was a brief conversation, too low to be over-heard, and then, while one man held the torch the other began digging in the soft mould.

It did not take him long to make a hole large enough for his purpose, which was now fairly obvious. The box was put in and covered up, both men helping in this operation.

The ground was then made smooth, some moss placed on top, and several handfuls of dead leaves thrown on it. This simple task complete, the men retraced their steps. They seemed to be in good spirits. Said Braunton, as they passed the spot where the watchers were once more lying flat :

"He'll be a smart guy who finds that. We'll get on with the machine in the morning. Another day or two should see us through."

"I shan't be sorry either," replied Mailings. "But for you cracking up we could have been away

"Okay, don't let's go over that again," broke in Braunton harshly. "It was sheer bad luck."

With that they passed on.

Biggles did not move except to turn his head to watch the men re-enter the hut they had recently left. The door was shut and a few minutes later the light went out, leaving everything in darkness.

"Well, that's that," murmured Biggles as he got up.

"Do you think they could have had the jewels in that box ? " asked Agra eagerly.

"I don't think there's any doubt about it," answered Biggles. "They were in that building, but in view of what I said about the aerodrome being re-opened they decided to put them out of sight in case anyone should turn up here."

"Why didn't you grab them while you had the chance ? " asked Ginger.

"We can be sure they'll still be here in the morning, otherwise they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of burying that box," replied Biggles.

"Had we made a move in the jungle just now anything could have happened.

We can reckon they carry guns, in which case there would have been shooting. They would have known that we had watched them burying

the box, and had either of them got away he could have made things very uncomfortable for us. When it gets light we shall be able to see better what we're doing. They have no idea we're here, so we should be able to catch them on one foot, so to speak. You can relax now. I'll keep an eye on things."

The night died slowly. Ginger must have dozed, but he was awakened by the pressure of Biggles's hand. Sitting up with a start he saw that dawn had broken. Following the direction of Biggles' eyes he observed Brauntun and Mallings walking towards the hangar, into which they presently disappeared.

"They're still hoping to get the machine finished so that they won't have to walk to wherever they intend taking the swag," remarked Biggles. He looked at his watch. "

Seven o'clock," he murmured. "We've plenty of time. Algy won't be back for an hour."

"Weren't you taking a chance, ordering the machine back before we had located the jewels ? " enquired

Ginger. "The return of the Wellington could hardly fail to make them suspicious."

"As a matter of fact that was my intention," returned Biggles. "In an emergency most people make a rush for their valuables. The chances are that Brauntun, in a panic, would have tried to save the jewels, and so shown us where they were. Actually, that is just what has happened."

Soon afterwards, from the building in front of them, came a curious, rasping whirr of wheels that Agra had first noticed.

Biggles glanced again at his watch. "Well, we might as well make a start," he decided. "

First of all we'll see what is going on in that building."

Making a detour to avoid being seen from the hangar should either of the two men come out, he advanced slowly to the door of what was now clearly revealed to be the old station headquarters, for a notice to that effect, in faded white letters, was still on it. With a warning signal to Ginger, Biggles took out his automatic and reached for the door-handle. It turned, but the door did not yield to his pressure. He knocked. The machine stopped and a voice said : "Who's that ? "

"Okay, open up," grunted Biggles, roughly imitating Braunton's voice.

The door was thrown open and a white man, dressed in overalls, stood on the threshold.

His lower jaw sagged foolishly as he stared into the muzzle of Biggles' gun.

"Take it easy and you won't get hurt," said Biggles curtly. "I'm a police officer and I want a word with you."

The man backed slowly into the room, followed closely by Biggles, who said tersely to Ginger : "All right. Take care of him."

Ginger stepped forward, and before the man could really have grasped what was happening a pair of light steel handcuffs were on his wrists.

"What's your name ? " demanded Biggles.

" Shrenk," was the answer in a surly voice. "I don't

" Nationality ? " cut in Biggles.

"Dutch. But I haven't done—"

"Save your breath," requested Biggles. "I take it you're a professional

diamond-cutter ? "

There was no answer. Not that one was needed, for the tools of the man's trade lay on the bench. In a vice glowed an enormous ruby on which apparently he had been working.

Overhead shafting operated the cutting apparatus.

Biggles glanced at Agra. "We were just about in time. Your sparklers would soon have been unrecognisable." To the Dutchman, a heavily built man with an expressionless face, he said : "Where did you come from ? "

"Calcutta. But Braunton told me—"

"Never mind what Braunton told you. You knew these stones had been stolen. Be careful, because anything you say may be used as evidence against you." Again Biggles looked at his watch. "Two minutes to eight,"

he observed. "I hope Algy's on time."

Ginger went to the door. "I can hear him coming now," he asserted.

"Get over against the wall and stand still," Biggles told the diamond cutter. "Don't try any tricks."

"What about the other two ? " asked Ginger in a low voice.

"We needn't go for them. They'll come here when they hear the machine, and recognise it," answered Biggles.

In this surmise he was correct. A minute later came the sound of running feet. Then came Braunton's voice, shouting : " Shrenk, get everything out of sight."

A moment later the man himself; Mailings with him, burst into the room.

They stopped dead, their eyes round and lips parted from shock when they saw Biggles and Ginger standing there with guns in their hands.

"Come right in, Braunton, the game's up," said Biggles crisply. "You haven't a chance, so don't do anything silly. Keep you hands where I can see them —both of you."

Braunton, pale and agitated, found his voice. "Who are you ? " he blurted.

"We're police officers, and you're under arrest," answered Biggles shortly. To Ginger he went on. "Go and bring the machine this way."

The scene remained unchanged while the Wellington landed and taxied in.

"Look here," said Braunton desperately. "I'll do a deal with you. I've got the stuff. I'll admit that. But only I know where it is. I'll go fifty-fifty with you."

"Nothing doing," said Biggles icily. "Trying to bribe a police officer won't make your case any better."

"Okay, smart guy," snarled Braunton. "You may have got me but you'll never get the stuff. I shall be back one day and it'll still be where I put it."

"Maybe," returned Biggles imperturbably. "But maybe we're smarter than you think."

"You haven't a hope of finding it," sneered Braun-ton. "Take me and you can say good-bye to the stuff you're looking for."

"I'm not looking for anything," said Biggles coldly. "Save your breath."

You'll have plenty of time for talking later on."

Algy and Bertie came hurrying in. Biggles made a signal and the handcuffs closed on the wrists of the two jewel thieves. "Keep an eye on them until I come back," he ordered.

Then, beckoning to Ginger and Agra to go with him, he went out and walked briskly to the tree under which the box had been buried. The mould, recently disturbed, was soft, and it did not take long to recover the box. It was padlocked.

"I'll get the key," offered Ginger. "Braunton will have it."

"Don't trouble. Give me a hand. We'll take it to the machine, calling at the hangar on the way."

In the hangar the box was lowered to the ground. "We'll just make sure there's no mistake," said Biggles, selecting a cold chisel and inserting it through the padlock. A jerk of his wrist and the lock snapped off. He threw open the lid, and there, flashing and gleaming in the light, lay such a collection of diamonds, rubies, emeralds and pearls, that Ginger could only blink in wonder and admiration.

"Well, there it is," murmured Biggles. "It's all yours, Agra, so you can help to carry it to the machine. I'll go and fetch the others and we'll head back for Calcutta for a bath and some breakfast."

There is little more to tell. A week later the Wellington and its crew were back in London, where Air Commodore Raymond had already been advised by radio of the outcome of the case. Agra remained in India for the time being as affairs at Malliapore needed his presence. Braunton and Mailings received long terms of imprisonment, although Shrenk, who was only an accessory, got off with a lighter sentence.

Some weeks later Biggles received a registered packet with Indian stamps on it. In it were four magnificent, uncut rubies, one for each of those engaged in the operation, and a letter from Agra expressing his thanks and gratitude for the return of his fortune and extending an open invitation to the Palace at Malliapore should the course of the

special Air Police ever lie in that direction.

THE CASE OF THE UNKNOWN

AIRCRAFT

IT was unusual for Air Commodore Raymond to walk unannounced into the Operations'

Room of the Air Police Service ; for which reason Biggles, who was at work on his records, raised his eyebrows and stood up when the Air Commodore strode in. Air Constables Ginger Hebblethwaite and Bertie Lissie also sprang to their feet, Bertie dropping his eye-glass in his agitation but catching it deftly.

"All right you fellows, sit down," said the Air Commodore quickly. "

Bigglesworth, I want you to fly up to Scotland right away."

"Very good, sir," acknowledged Biggles, closing his books.

"The job's top priority. I assume you have an aircraft standing by at the airfield ? "

" Lacey's on duty there," stated Biggles. "I can get him on the phone and he'll have any machine I want ready by the time I get there."

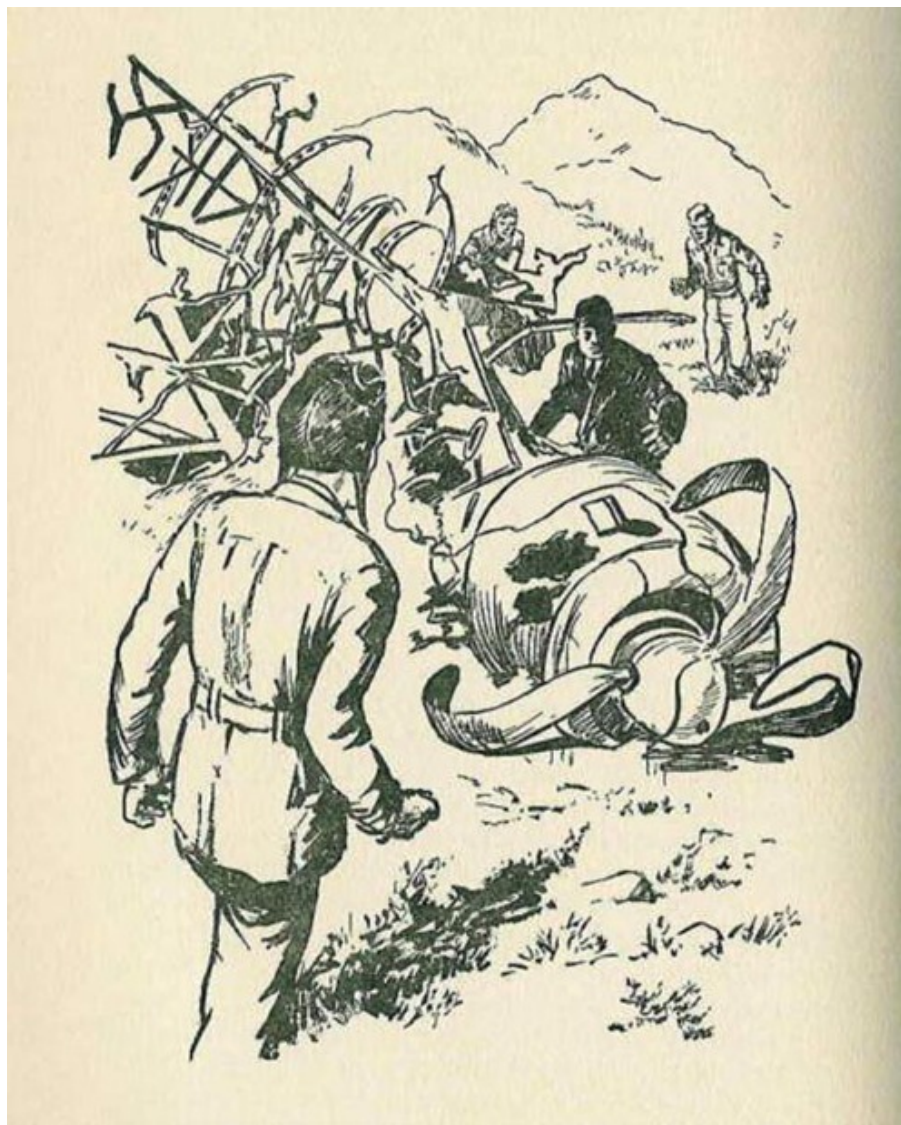
"I'm afraid there'll be a long walk involved in getting where I want you to go," said the Air Commodore apologetically. "There's no aerodrome within twenty miles.

Lossiemouth is probably as near as any. You could get a car from there, but it means a long walk at the finish."

Biggles looked alarmed. "I'm not much for walking," he protested. "

Life's too short."

"I know—I know ; that's why I mentioned it."



"If you'll tell me the trouble, sir, maybe I can think of something to save the soles of my feet," suggested Biggles.

"Your objective lies in the Cairngorms, which, as you've probably flown over them in your time, you may recall is a pretty formidable group of mountains in Scotland."

Biggles smiled faintly. "Is it at the top or the bottom? I'm nothing for climbing, but I don't mind walking downhill."

"It's about half-way up—on the slope of Ben Macdhui, to be precise."

"What's happened there ? "

"That's what I'd like to know," replied the Air Commodore grimly. "I mean, I know what

s happened. I want to know why. This is the story as it has been given to me. Two days ago a gillie out watching deer was caught in a sudden fog—a not unusual event—and sat down to wait for it to lift. Sitting there he heard an aircraft flying low. Then he heard it crash. Taking a chance of losing his way, he made for the direction of the sound. He found the machine in flames. He couldn't get near it so he set off down the mountain to fetch help. The police at Aviemore phoned the Air Ministry.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about this. It's happened before, and will happen again while pilots try to take short cuts through clouds that have rocks in them. The Cairngorms are liable to get in the way of anyone flying below five thousand feet.

"The usual procedure was taken. An R.A.F. Alpine Rescue Squad went up. By the time they got there the fire was out. Luckily there had been rain so the heather was wet, otherwise the whole area would have been burnt out.

The machine was a single-seater, so there was only one body in it, burnt, as usual, beyond recognition. We now come to the mystery. No machine has been reported missing. The R.A.F. had only a few machines out on that day and all returned safely to base. Airline operators don't use single-seaters, so they don't come into it. Every private owner has been contacted and accounted for.

The problem that arose, therefore, was where did this machine come from where was it going, and who was flying it ? The Air Ministry Inspector of Accidents sent a man up to look at it. He's just back, and all he's done is put an even more sinister aspect on the thing." The Air

Commodore took a cigarette from his case.

"This man states that the machine is of no type known to us. That in itself is a staggerer, although, of course, there's just a chance that he is in error, as would be understandable owing to the state of the crash.

Apparently this unknown pilot flew head-on into the side of the mountain with results that you can well imagine. All that's left is a tangled heap of scrap. The fire did the rest."

"What about the engine ? " put in Biggles. "That would still be in one piece and it should tell us something."

"Believe it or not, the Air Ministry has been unable to identify it. All we know is, it's a twelve cylinder, air-cooled radial that probably developed something in the order of a thousand horse power. Judging from what remains of the tanks it must have carried a big load of fuel. A long range job, obviously. But even on the engine it hasn't been possible to find a mark or a number."

Biggles looked incredulous.

"You might well stare," said the Air Commodore.

"It must have been a special job for secret work, or possibly a prototype that never went into production," opined Biggles. "Even so, you'd think there would be a mark somewhere."

"The rest of the story tends to confirm that it might have been a special job for top secret work," went on the Air Commodore slowly. "The officer from the Accidents Board found in the wreckage a lump of metal which, although it had been melted by the heat to an

irregular mass, he could not place as a component part of either the airframe or engine. It was as heavy as lead, which again seemed odd, because you don't find lumps of lead incorporated in an aeroplane, in which lightness is an important factor. He brought this metal down

with him. It has just been identified, and when I tell you what it is, you'll believe me when I say that the atomic research people, and their security guards, are fairly rocking on their heels."

" What is this stuff? "

"Uranium."

Biggles let out a low whistle. "Suffering Icarus ! That certainly is a bone-shaker. Have our atomic people lost any ? "

" No."

"What about America ? "

"We're in touch with them, but so far we haven't received a reply. The stuff was certainly stolen from an official source somewhere because it's virtually impossible for a civilian to get hold of any."

"This lump must be worth a lot of money."

"It is, but the intrinsic value is secondary. It's the fact that an unauthorised person was flying across this country with a quantity in his possession that has sent the balloon up."

"What has happened to the body ? " asked Biggles. "It was brought down, and was buried today in the nearest churchyard."

"And there was absolutely no clue, nothing in the pockets, that might give a line even to the man's nationality ? "

Nothing. Only one thing remained in his clothing that was not destroyed by fire ; but it was not without significance. It was a Luger automatic pistol. It had been loaded, but the cartridges had exploded in the heat.

Respectable peace-time pilots don't carry automatic weapons."

"Quite. He was ready for trouble apparently—but not the sort he met."

Biggles tapped a cigarette slowly on the back of his hand. "Just what do you want me to do about this ? "

"I want you to find out who this man was and where he was going."

"That's a tall order, with only a charred corpse and some buckled longrons to work on."

"Had it been a simple one, it's unlikely that the case would have been brought to us,"

averred the Air Commodore, a trifle bitterly.

Biggles thought for a minute. "Tell me this," he requested. "Are these Alpine Rescue fellows still on the spot ? "

"Yes. They're standing by waiting for orders." "The Air Ministry will be in touch with them by

radio, I imagine ? " ,c

"Then for a start, will you ask the Ministry to tell these chaps to stay where they are until I get there, after which they must be withdrawn. I shan't need them. If that signal can be sent in code so much the better.

There's just a chance someone else may be listening."

"I'll do that."

"One other point. Has this story got into the newspapers? "

"Not yet, but the evening papers have got hold of it and they are putting out a story about an aircraft, at present unidentified, crashing

in the Cairngorms."

"They're not saying exactly where in the Cairngorms?"

"No. They don't know."

"Then I'd like them to."

The Air Commodore looked rather surprised, but he agreed. "All right. If that's how you want it I'll arrange it. I'll let them know that the crash lies halfway up the western slope of Ben MacDhui."

"You can also tell them that the body has been brought down and the guard withdrawn."

The Air Commodore's eyebrows went up. "Why ? " Biggles smiled.
"Just a little idea of mine. I suppose it isn't difficult to spot the crash ?
"

"The wreckage is scattered over half an acre." Biggles got up. "Okay, sir. I'll see what I can do about it."

"Don't be too long over it or I'm likely to lose my job," declared the Air Commodore, as he went out.

"Well, stuff me with suet pudding ! He doesn't want much," snorted Bertie, after the door had closed.

"I must admit this looks like a poser," admitted Biggles. "Well, let's get on with it. The first thing is to get to the crash."

But here, I say old boy, that means climbing up the beastly mountain," protested Bertie.

"I'm not climbing up any mountains," stated Biggles. "Ginger, ring Algy

and tell him to have the Proctor ready to take off in half an hour, with three parachutes. He won't need one himself; he's Duty Officer so he'll have to come back. If we get cracking we should just be able to reach the objective in daylight."

"What's the idea ? " asked Ginger. "What are we going to look for when we get there ? "

"Nothing in particular," Biggles told him. "I hope somebody else will come looking for something, though—a lump of uranium, for instance. Get your brains weaving. This unlucky pilot wasn't just cruising about on his own account with a lump of atomic energy in his pocket. Unless I'm mistaken he was only the errand boy. Somebody, somewhere, was waiting for him. When he doesn't turn up that somebody is going to get worried.

When he reads in the papers that an unidentified plane has hit the carpet in Scotland, he'

ll know, or he'll think he knows, where his precious lump of uranium is lying. What will he do ? I'll give you one guess."

"Go to look for it," answered Ginger promptly.

"Right first time," acknowledged Biggles. I want to be there when he gets there. Which is why, to save time, I asked the Air Commodore to tell him through the papers, just where the crash is lying. With a little encouragement this fellow may be induced to tell us what our security people must be panting to know—where the uranium started from and where it was going. Come on, let's get mobile. Bring your binoculars, Ginger.

We're going to the wide open spaces."

The sun was setting in a clear, windless sky, behind the rugged Monadhliath Mountains of Inverness-shire when the police machine arrived over the remains of the ill-fated aircraft which, lying in the middle of a blackened area of heather, were plain to see. The Proctor circled once, and then made a straight run at little more than stalling speed across the gently sloping flank of the mountain. In quick

succession four objects dropped from its escape hatch ; first a large bundle, then three figures that were Biggles, Ginger and Bertie. As soon as Biggles, who had dropped last, had left the machine, the engine resumed its normal note and stood away to the south.

Ginger, after stumbling and falling in a sea of purple heather, picked himself up, stepped out of his harness, and turned to find himself the object of critical scrutiny by half a dozen stalwart young men in air force blue.

"Is that the way you usually get around ? " asked one, grinning.

"More or less," answered Ginger casually. "As in this case, it is sometimes easier than walking."

"Are you telling me ? " returned the Rescue man.

The arrival of Biggles on the scene put an end to facetious conversation.

"Who's in charge here ? " he asked briefly.

A corporal stepped forward. "I am, sir."

"I see. My name's Bigglesworth. Have you had a signal from the Air Ministry about me ? "

"Yes sir. I'm to take your orders," reported the corporal.

"They are quite simple," answered Biggles. "You can pack up and go home.

I'm taking over."

"That suits me," declared the corporal. "A couple of days here have been long enough."

"Did you bring a tent ? "

"No, we've made a rough bivvy by those big rocks." The airman pointed.

"Any rations left ? "

"Some tins of bully, biscuits, tea, sugar and condensed milk."

"Fine. You can leave them. I'll send a chit to the Air Ministry when I get back to say I took them over. Seen anybody about ? "

"Not a soul since the Accidents Branch officer departed."

"Okay. If you look lively you'll be off the hill before it gets dark."

The corporal turned away, and in a few minutes he and his crew could be seen striding down the hill in single file.

"And now what's the drill, old boy ? " asked Bertie.

"The drill is, for a start, you can go and collect the bundle of stores we dropped. It fell over there." He pointed. "Then we'll go and have a look at the corporal's bivouac, brew a dish of tea on the spirit stove, and keeping under cover make ourselves comfortable. We'

ll take turns at mounting guard. Those rocks seem to be just the right distance away from the crash.

No noise. Sounds carry a long way in This still air."

Biggles walked on towards the rocks, looking at the wreckage in passing.

"What a mess !

" he breathed. "That pilot couldn't have been very bright or he'd have known what was in front of him. Maps aren't expensive."

Ginger stopped to look at the spot where the unknown pilot must have been hurled from life to death in an instant of time without knowing anything about it. He gazed around.

Even on a summer evening, the landscape, with its brooding silence, was one of utter loneliness and mournful melancholy. The only sign of life was a grouse-cock sitting on a rock two hundred yards away watching him with deep suspicion. On three sides rose the purple giants of the Highlands, their outlines softened by distance and an imperceptible mist that had already filled the corries. Far below, the valleys were pools of sombre shadows. It was, he pondered, an appropriate setting for tragedy, and the vigil they were about to undertake.

Turning away he followed Biggles to the bivouac, which turned out to be no more than a flattened pile of heather in a slight depression with a primitive fireplace built of stones. A spring bubbled near at hand.

"When do you reckon this chap's likely to show up, if he's coming ? "

Bertie was asking.

"I couldn't guess," replied Biggles. "If he starts from somewhere close, he should be here fairly soon ; but he may have to come from the Continent. Be sure he'll get here as soon as possible because the longer the delay the greater will be the chance of someone finding the uranium.

He'll know where to come because the exact location of the crash must have appeared in the papers some hours ago. The question is, will he come by night or by day ? Both times have advantages and disadvantages. By night it would be more difficult to find the stuff, but by day there would be more chance of being spotted by someone. I'd say he'll try his luck in the dark. If he fails, then he'll wait for daylight. We'll take two-hour watches. There's nothing else we can do. The wreck can tell us nothing we don't already know. You'll take first watch, Bertie. Keep an eye on the skylines but don't show yourself."

Biggles lay back and lit a cigarette.

Ginger awoke with a start and found himself in a world of blue moonlight and vague shadows. Biggles was squeezing his arm.

"What goes on ? " whispered Ginger, awake on the instant and remembering where he was.

" Ssh ! Someone's coming."

Ginger raised himself to a sitting position. " Where ?" "Can't see him yet. Twice a rolling stone has rattled on the scree below us."

"What's the time ? "

"Half-past one."

Nothing more was said. Ginger crouched beside Biggles. A yard away Bertie lay flat behind a stone. Several minutes passed in a silence that was profound. It was broken by a sudden whirr of wings as a brood of grouse hurtled past. Ginger didn't move, but his nerves grew taut as his eyes strove to probe the shadowy world in the direction from which the birds had come. What had disturbed them ?—a fox, a wild cat . . . or a man ?

It was a man. Presently he saw him, a mere outline against the colourless background, a silhouette that hardened as it drew nearer. Boots swished in brittle, sun-dried heather.

Then came the sound of heavy breathing as the figure, toiling uphill and at a distance of perhaps forty yards, suddenly altered its direction towards the scene of the fatal accident.

Now it was possible to make out a face, pallid in the moonlight.

Once the man stopped to gaze around, as if to make sure that he was alone. Then he went on again, quickly now, and presently the sound

of metal scraping against metal told the watchers that he'd reached his objective and had begun his search. His purpose was no longer in doubt.

Biggles drew the others to him and cupping his hands round his mouth, whispered :

Bertie, work round behind him in case he sees us and bolts. He'll run downhill if he goes.

Ginger, come with me. Keep close. No noise."

Fortunately the man himself was by this time making enough noise to drown the lesser sounds that their movements might cause.

Biggles crawled forward through the heather, feeling his way, stopping frequently.

Ginger followed in like manner at his heels. He couldn't see the man but he could hear him all the time as he searched within the charred and twisted wreckage. Nearer and nearer they drew, until they, too, were at the crash. And still the man was obviously unaware of their presence.

Biggles touched Ginger on the arm and pointed. Grasping the meaning of the signal, Ginger worked his way to the far side of the gaunt skeleton of what had been an aircraft. Then came a pause.

It was broken in dramatic fashion. Biggles's voice cut through the hush like a whip-lash.

"Come out of that ! " he ordered.

A shuddering intake of breath told Ginger the extent of the shock the words inflicted.

There was a wild rush as the man scrambled out on his side. "Take it easy

! " rapped out Ginger. The man spun round, and crouched as if to run ; but Bertie rose up from the heather and the man remained motionless. They all closed in on him.

Biggles spoke, and his tone was peremptory. "We're security police. Who are you ? "

Silence.

"What's your name ? " snapped Biggles.

" Lowenski," came a nervous voice, tinged with a slight accent.

" Nationality ? "

" British."

"Since when ? "

"A year ago."

"And before that ? "

" Polish."

"Did you come to this country as a soldier or as a displaced person ? "

"I came in the War and flew with the R.A.F." "Where do you live now ? "

"Perth. I was stationed in Scotland. I've got a shop there. What's the matter ? I can come here if I like. This isn't private ground."

Biggles ignored the questions. "Did you know the man who was flying this machine ? "

A brief pause. "I think so."

"A friend of yours ? "

"I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm right—yes." "Another Pole ? "

When Biggles went on his tone was less harsh. "Now listen carefully, Lowenski. We know what you're doing here, so we needn't waste time arguing about that. What you came for isn't here. Just how far you are implicated, I don't know. I shall find out, so on what you say much will depend. Now then. Answer my questions and you'll find that we'

re not unreasonable. Try being awkward and you'll find we can be awkward too."

"You can't do anything to me," came back Lowenski. But the confident tone in which the words were said didn't ring true.

"You are still on probation," said Biggles curtly. "I could have you sent back to Poland. How would that suit you ? "

The hesitation that followed told Ginger that the shot had gone home.

"You—you wouldn't do that," almost pleaded Lowenski. "What about my wife

? "

"What about her ? "

"I married a Scotch girl."

"Then she looks like being out of luck unless you come clean. Now, what about it ? "

"All right. What do you want to know ? " asked Lowenski desperately.

"Are you in this business on your own account or are you working for somebody ? "

demanded Biggles.

"Own account ? Not likely ! Where would I get the money to finance a game of this size

? "

"But you're in it for money."

"That's where you're wrong. I can earn my living without scrambling up and down mountains all night. It happens I've got a father and mother in Poland. They've been interned on a trumped-up political charge. If I don't do what I'm told, they've had it."

" Oh ! So that's it," murmured Biggles. "The Government bosses who are running your country have got the screws on you, eh ? "

"That's the truth."

"Have they made you do this sort of thing before ? " " No."

"Where did this machine start from ? "

"America, I think."

"Where was it going ? "

"Warsaw, I believe."

"Why are you in doubt about it ? "

"I can only tell you what I think," protested Lowenski. "I'm not supposed to know anything about it. But it happens that a Polish friend of mine, another old War pilot, is in the same fix as I am, only in his case it's his wife they've got in Poland. The other day I had a letter from him to say he was being sent to America to fetch a

machine and fly it to Warsaw.

They'd chosen him, they said, because he had been a night bomber and he knows his way across Europe in the dark. He was hoping to see his wife when he got over. How he came to be so far off his track I don't know, but when I heard about this mysterious crash I put two and two together.

We did our raids from an aerodrome not far from here. Maybe Stefan, if it was him, came this way to pick up the old bearings."

"And how were you brought into this ? "

"This afternoon I had a phone call from London ordering me to go to the crash and collect some bars of heavy metal I'd find in it. I reckon I was chosen because Perth is not a great distance away. I could get here quicker than anyone coming from London."

"Who phoned you ? "

"I don't know. I've never seen the man or heard his name ; but I'd been warned by him to obey orders —or else If

"How did you get here ? "

"I've got a car."

"And having got the metal, what were you to do with it ? Speak up ! This is your chance to get your own back on these twisters."

Lowenski seemed to take a new interest. "Yes, that's right enough. My orders were to take the stuff to the big marsh near Nethy. At four o'clock, just before daybreak, a plane would land and collect it. All I had to do was hand the stuff over and then send a telegram first thing in the morning to a Box Number at the General Post Office, London, saying that the job had been done."

"I'll have that Box Number from you," said Biggles. "Meantime, I'm going to keep the appointment with that plane. I shall have to borrow your car.

You can come with us and go home afterwards, or you can make your own way home, leaving me your address, because I shall have to get in touch with you later."

"I'll come with you," decided Lowenski.

At five minutes to four, having left the car on the road, Biggles led his party into the big desolate marsh, now dried by the summer sun, that was Lowenski's rendezvous with the enemy agent.

As Biggles admitted to Ginger, it was an ideal place for a sinister assignation. On one side the land lay flat and deserted to Strathspey, a haunt for wild fowl. To the south rose the mountains. To the north, the rising ground that fringed the marsh was occupied by a forest of Scots pines. So much could be discerned in the waning light of a dying moon.

Going on to the shadows of the trees they sat down to wait.

As a matter of detail the aircraft was a little overdue ; and they were unaware of its presence until it suddenly came gliding low over them—the result, as Ginger realised, of the pilot coming over very high with his power cut off. A black, twin-engined, low-wing monoplane, landed almost without a sound. Only the engines, whispering as they idled, revealed its presence. It came to a standstill about a hundred yards away.

Biggles was already running towards it, followed by the others, when a man jumped down and looked about him. For a moment or two he did not see Biggles's party but when he did, apparently scenting danger, he moved fast. Thereafter things happened in less time than they take to tell.

The man shouted something in a foreign language, obviously a

warning to somebody in the machine—the first indication that he was not alone. And had he concentrated his efforts entirely on getting back into the plane he might have got away with it. Instead, quite

unnecessarily, on the way he turned ; his hand went to a pocket and an automatic spat twice, one of the shots whistling unpleasantly close to Ginger's head. Biggles fired back, missed the man but hit the machine.

The man made a dash for safety, but in his haste forgot to look where he was going. Biggles, perceiving what was likely to happen, shouted a warning ; but it was too late. The man ran too close to one of the low-set airscrews. There was a vicious smack and a shower of splinters as one of the whirling blades struck his skull. He went down as if he had been shot through the heart.

By this time, the man in the aircraft—the pilot, it is to be supposed—had of course realised that he was in a trap. He may have seen his partner fall, apparently to Biggles'

shot, which would account for, and perhaps justify, the course he took.

But the fact remains, that he was prepared to abandon his companion in order to save himself was made clear when the engines roared, as the first move in taking off. What he could not have realised was, one airscrew was shattered. The result may be imagined.

Biggles and his party flung themselves clear as the aircraft charged past them and raced on with swiftly increasing speed; but being unbalanced it immediately started a wild swerve. A cry of horror broke from Ginger's lips as the machine, continuing its swerve, rushed headlong at the pine wood.

Whether the pilot lost his head, or whether he still hoped to get airborne, will never be known. At the last moment the machine did manage to get off the ground, but there was never the slightest chance of it clearing the trees. At the last moment the pilot must have known this, for the engines died abruptly, as if the ignition had been cut to minimise the risk of fire when the inevitable crash occurred. There came the horrible, tearing, splintering noise of a crashing aircraft. It

was followed by a silence just as awful. The only sound was the drip of petrol escaping from a fractured tank.

Biggles rapped out an order to Bertie to attend to the man who had collided with the airscrew, and then raced to the crash. Ginger went with him, and at the sight that met his eyes something inside him seemed to go cold. A couple of minutes answered their unspoken question. The pilot was dead. They could only leave him lying beside the wrecked machine while they went back to Bertie.

"He's had it," reported Bertie briefly. "The blade took the top of his head off, poor devil."

"All right," said Biggles, in an expressionless voice. "We'll get to the phone and put a police guard over this mess until I've had a word with the Chief."

Little remains to be told. At the subsequent enquiry, held behind locked doors, it was revealed that the plane that had crashed on the mountain, a new secret prototype, and its cargo, had been stolen in America. The pilot, presumably in the hope of escaping pursuit, had made a wide sweep to the north before heading for a European destination. What this was to have been was suggested by the type of machine that had crashed in the trees, and the nationality of its occupants.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the affair was what followed the arrival at the London Post Office of the foreign agent who had given Lowenski orders to recover the uranium. A telegram was waiting for him, ostensibly from Lowenski, but, in fact, one that had been planted by the police. The man collected it and was afterwards followed to what turned out to be the London headquarters of a nest of international spies. A police raid on the building yielded information that had been sought for a long time.

For security reasons, not a word of the story appeared in the newspapers, so it is unlikely that those who sent the machine to fetch the uranium ever knew what became of it and its crew. To save Lowenski from possible reprisals, he was officially sent to prison. Unofficially, he was compensated for the loss of his business and given

facilities to emigrate to a British colony, where, some time later, his parents, whose release had been secured by political negotiation, joined him. So, on the whole, he came out of the business better than he could have hoped. As far as Biggles was concerned, it was just another job of work buttoned up.

THE RENEGADE

"I'VE a sticky job here I shall have to ask you to look at. Air Commodore Raymond pushed the cigarette box on his desk to within Biggles'

reach. "Strictly speaking," he went on, "it's not our affair—but you know how these things happen. The docket has been passed to me and I shall have to deal with it."

Biggles lit a cigarette. "Who's being a nuisance now ? "

"A fellow by the name of Vandor. Captain Langley Vandor. The captain part of it, I may say, he supplied himself. It flatters his vanity to pretend that he's been in military service.

He lives in Malaya, where, as you know, the administration is having trouble in large doses."

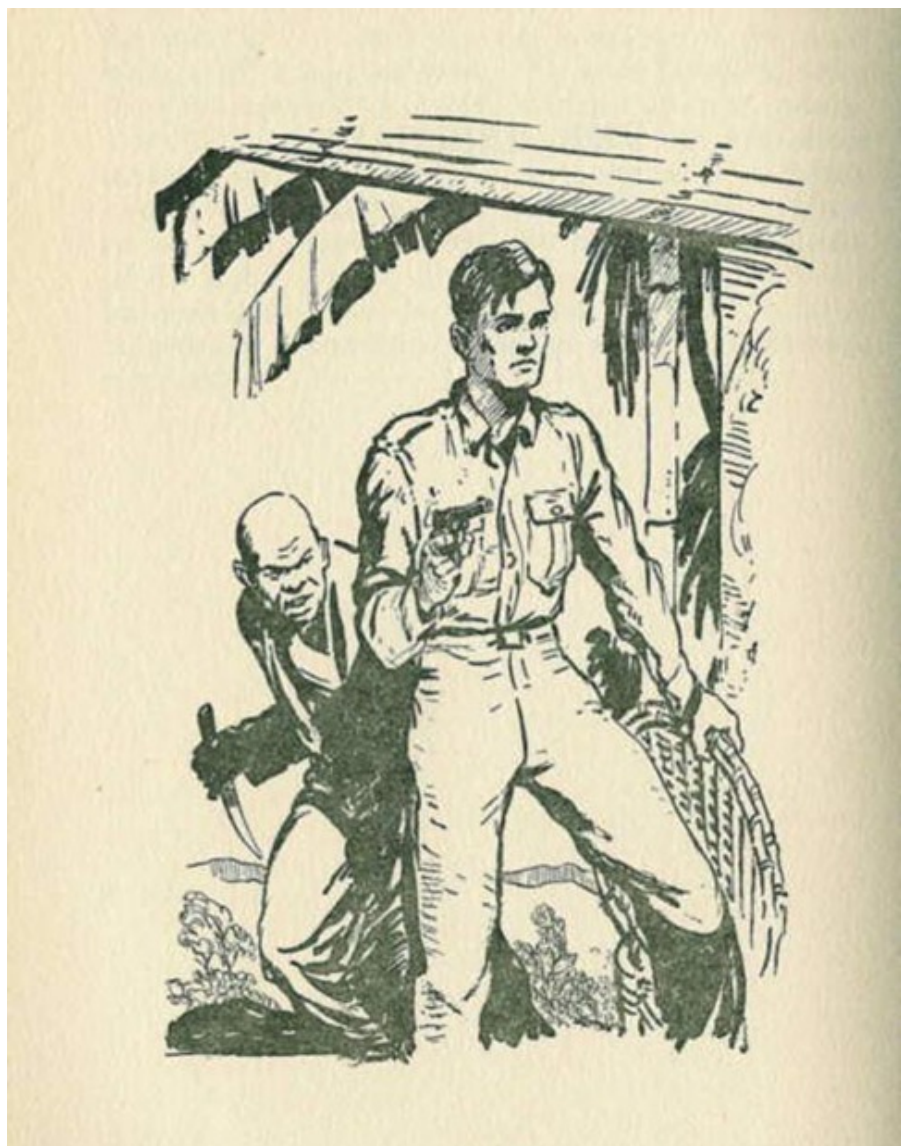
"What's this fellow Vandor done ? "

It isn't so much what he's done as what he's doing." The Air Commodore's voice became tintured with acid. "This rascal has been under suspicion for some time, but we now have definite information that he's supplying the bandits with arms and ammunition."

"What nationality is this unpleasant piece of work ? "

"By registration, and in appearance, British. By blood he's a Eurasian—or at any rate, a quarter Asiatic. His grandfather was a Merchant Navy skipper, a good type of the old school. When he retired from the sea

he married, in Singapore, a girl of mixed breed, became a planter, and made a fortune in the rubber boom. With his money he established a big estate



at a place called Marapang, in the north-east corner of Malaya. He had a son, apparently quite a decent fellow, who married an Irish girl, and when the old man died, inherited everything. Captain Langley Vandor was the result of that union, and he soon revealed himself to be a throwback of the worst possible type. His parents are dead now and

he has the estate." The Air Commodore stubbed his cigarette.

"When this boy was old enough," he continued, " he was sent to a public school in England, and it was there that his crooked streak first showed itself—at least, as far as we know. We don't know what his behaviour was like at home, but he had obviously been thoroughly spoiled. He was expelled from school for theft. Apparently he was a thief by nature because he didn't need the money : his people gave him an ample allowance. When the father heard of this he ordered the boy home. Not a bit of it.

Instead, the young rascal drifted to the Port of London where he got in with the worst types of Oriental seamen. He was often in trouble. We know now that he was in an opium-smuggling racket. There is also reason to suppose that he killed a Chinese sailor by stabbing him. When he was twenty-one his father died, officially from snakebite, although native rumour has it that this young devil actually bribed a Malay seaman to put a cobra in his father's bed. His mother was already dead. She died of heartbreak, they say.

However that may be, Vandor went back to Malaya and took over the estate, to which he was of course entitled. We were glad to see him go. If he didn't like us, and he made it clear that he didn't, we certainly didn't like him.

"We heard little of him for a couple of years because Marapang lies away back in the jungle. Moreover, he let it be known that British visitors were not welcome. According to native report he boasted of his white blood but behaved like a coloured tyrant. He came to Singapore occasionally. He learned to fly at the club at Kuala Lumpur, bought his own light plane, and laid down an airstrip through the paddy fields at Marapang.

Nobody at Singapore wanted to know him which probably infuriated him, and his visits became less frequent. That's how matters stood when the war broke out."

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. "One so-called Britisher of that sort can undo all the good work of a decent administration."

"Exactly. What Vandor did during the Japanese occupation we don't know, but we can imagine he was a useful collaborator. Anyway, he stayed in the country. When the Japs went he was still at Marapang, and that brings us to the present trouble.

"When the bandits started their murder campaign they used a variety of weapons, which was only to be expected ; but among them was a large sprinkling of German Spandau rifles. These, we can suppose, were supplied to the Japs by their German allies during the war. We thought the ammunition for these rifles would soon run out. It didn't. The supply seemed inexhaustible. We tried to find out where these cartridges were coming from. I should explain that when we returned to Malaya after the occupation we ordered all these firearms and ammunition to be brought in.

Some were, some were not. The Japs had left a lot of stuff behind, grenades and war material of all sorts ; much of it just disappeared.

We know now that Vandor had sent out word that he was prepared to buy this stuff ; and a good many natives, instead of turning in what they found, did sell it to Vandor."

"And now the murder gangs are at work I suppose Vandor is selling the stuff to them ? "

"That's it—at an enormous profit, of course." "This murder business must have suited him ? " "So well that if he didn't set it going he was soon supporting it."

"How did you get this information ? " asked Biggles curiously.

"In a roundabout way, and as a result of Vandor's own disgraceful behaviour. In one of his frequent fits of passion he had beaten to death one of his plantation managers, a Chinaman by the name of Mr. Wong Loo, who had behaved very decently to our fellows who were taken prisoner in the war. Wong Loo had a son, an educated boy who didn't lack for courage.

He had a pretty good idea of what Vandor was doing, and for a time he actually worked in Vandor's big house to confirm it. He had seen

his father killed and was out for revenge. Having got all the gen on the place he bolted and made his way to British Headquarters in Singapore, where he told his story. Vandor, he says, still has a big stock of stuff, stored in what used to be a coach-house at the east end of the house. It seems that not content with making a fortune he hopes to see the British pushed out so that he can become the big noise in Malaya."

"And this is still going on ? "

"Presumably. We've only just heard about it."

"Why not winkle this scoundrel out of his lair ? "

The Air Commodore shook his head. "An obvious question, and the answer is just as obvious. It couldn't be done. Marapang always was a difficult place to get to ; with the country swarming with bandits it would be a stiff job for an army. Vandor would hear about such an expedition long before it got there and retire into the jungle, taking his stuff with him. You've seen the Malay jungle so there's no need for me to tell you what it'

s like. Another snag is, the north-east monsoon is due to break shortly."

"If you want to destroy this dump how about a stick of bombs ? "

"The Higher Authority says no. Such drastic action which might kill innocent people, can't be justified on the unsubstantiated word of a single Chinese boy."

"So what ? "

"There's only one way to make absolutely certain of mopping up this infernal arsenal, and you know what it is. With Vandor himself we're not particularly concerned, but every one of his cartridges may mean the loss of a British life." The Air Commodore caught Biggles' eyes for a moment.

"Someone pretty high up has suggested that the Air Police have just the personnel and equipment for the job."

"Meaning me ? "

"Meaning you." The Air Commodore lit another cigarette. "There's a landing-ground," he suggested meaningly.

"What about roads ? "

"There aren't any. There's a jungle track, about sixty miles of it, bristling with cut-throats. You can forget about roads. No doubt Vandor has that particular approach well covered."

"I take it you've got air photos of this place, Marapang ? "

"Of course. We got the Air Force to take a series, both vertical and oblique."

"I'd like to have a look at them."

The Air Commodore took a batch of prints from the docket and passed them over. "The stuff is stored at the end of the east wing. Young Wong, the Chinese boy, helped us to draw a sketch plan of the place. I have it here."

Biggles picked up a magnifying glass and studied the photographs thoughtfully. "The only flat patch for miles seems to be the paddy fields and the airstrip that runs through them," he observed. "The paddy fields will be under water so they're no use to us. The rest is plantation and jungle." He picked up a pencil and pointed. "Do you know anything about this sheet of water ? "

"That's an artificial reservoir made by damming a stream. It's in hilly country, a thousand feet above the

house. A track leads up to it. The reservoir provides the estate with water and hydro-electric power."

"I see." Biggles pointed again. "And this, I imagine, is the hangar ? "

"Yes. It's a primitive, palm-thatched, frame building."

"Does Vandor still run an aircraft ? "

"Yes, but we don't know where he goes in it, or how he gets his petrol.

The boy says the machine is kept in order by a Tamil mechanic who once served in the Burmese Air Force."

"What's the machine ? "

"A Gipsy Moth."

Biggles nodded. "All right, sir," he said. "I'll keep this stuff and memorise it while I'm getting organised. Before I go I'll let you have the general scheme. The fewer people who know about it the better, but you'd better warn the Commander-in-Chief, Singapore, that I'm on the way, and ask him to give me the usual facilities."

"I'll do that. Is there anything else you want ? "

"I'd like one of those velvet-lined pocket cases holding demolition and incendiary bombs that were issued

to Special Air Service operators in the war."

"

see to it," promised the Air Commodore.

Biggles got up.

The main objective, I take it, is the

destruction of the war material ? "

"Yes. If you can get hold of Vandor at the same time so well and good, but don't take too many chances to do that. Kill the ammunition."

"I'll see what I can do about it," promised Biggles.

A week after the conversation in the Air Commodore's office a "Skud"

amphibious aircraft of the Air Police Flight droned its way northward from Singapore through a cloudless sky under stars that were being dimmed by a rising moon, nearly full. The altimeter registered ten thousand feet, but still the Skud climbed slowly as it crossed the mighty bowl between horizon and horizon. Far away to the east the moonlight glimmered faintly on the waters of the South China Sea. Below and to the west, an inky void was all that could be seen of the vast Malayan jungles, although here and there a point of light occurred to mark an uneasy human habitation. Ahead there was nothing but darkness. Through it the machine droned on, a shadowy shape in that lonely world between earth and sky that only airmen know.

At the controls, with Ginger beside him, sat Biggles, his face expressionless, eyes brooding on the sombre emptiness beyond the windscreen or roving the luminous dials of the instrument panel that filled the cockpit with a pallid glow. He sat a little higher in his seat than usual, but this was only because he was sitting on a parachute.

After a silence that had lasted for some time he said to Ginger :
"You're quite clear about what I want you to do ? "

"Absolutely. But I still think it's taking a frightful risk to drop in by brolly. If you miss the open area

" If you'll hold the machine steady I shan't miss it," broke in Biggles.

"There's no wind. If I hit the trees—well it wouldn't be the first time."

"It would be safer to let me put you down on the reservoir."

"A safe way is not always the best way. You'd be heard getting off again."

"I could wait."

"I may be some time, and you might be seen, in which case you'd have to abandon the machine or take it off. Either way the place would be on the alert and that would make things more difficult for me."

"Algy and Bertie are in reserve to cover that contingency."

"I prefer it my way. The fewer people there are on the ground the less risk will there be of discovery. This job must be done before Vandor can get a whiff of what's in the wind."

"

Ginger said no more. He knew it was not much use arguing with Biggles once his mind was made up.

The aircraft droned on through the tropic night, still climbing, Biggles keeping the coastline in sight to check his position. The moon soared higher, its reflected light turning occasional rivers and lakes to shapeless blobs of quicksilver, which by contrast only accentuated the density of the jungle background.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning when Biggles, after checking the configuration of the coast with the map that lay on his knees, turned inland, his eyes probing the sombre world below. The engines died as he throttled back, easing the control column forward, so that the only sound was the melancholy sighing of air over the

outer surfaces of the machine.

After a while he said : "I think that must be the reservoir. There's no other water near except the stream that feeds it. I can't make out the airstrip, but I can see what look like paddy fields lying as the boy described them."

Ginger, too, stared down, his eyes trying to pick out salient points in an almost featureless landscape. Not a light showed anywhere. "I can see the paddy fields," he said presently. "There's a straight edge, too, that must be the boundary of a plantation."

"As there's no other cultivation within fifty miles it must be the place we're looking for,"

returned Biggles. "All right. Take over. Let her go down a bit. Hold her straight and level when I say the word. When I've gone, glide as far as you can before you open up."

"Okay. Got everything ? "

Biggles' hand ran over his harness, and his pockets. "Yes," he answered, and opened the escape hatch.

His hand groped for the parachute ring. He stared down. "Right a little,"

he called. "Little more. Steady. Now ! "

The nose of the Skud came up a trifle so that for a moment the machine was almost silent as it hung near stalling speed.

"So long," said Biggles evenly and slid off into space.

He counted six before pulling the ring. A second later the harness gripped his body with a jerk as the silk mushroomed above him. He swung a little at first, but steadied himself by handling the shrouds. Then he looked down to see where he was going.

The earth still looked far away, but the details were a little more definite. The silence was profound. He could no longer hear the aircraft—

not that he wanted to. He reached for the shrouds again when he saw he was drifting slightly towards the jungle. Then, suddenly, the earth seemed to be rising up to meet him, and he held his breath for the shock of impact. As it turned out there was surprisingly little shock, for his legs sank to the knees in the ooze in which young rice was growing. He stumbled and fell, but there was no wind so he was quickly on his feet again, crouching while the parachute, now released, settled like a patch of mist beside him.

For a minute he stood still, ears straining to catch the slightest sound ; but all was silent, so gathering up the silk that had brought him down he rolled it into a ball and sat on it while he took stock of his surroundings.

He saw that he had landed near the end of the cultivated ground and within a hundred yards of the nearest timber, which, from its straight edge, he knew must be a rubber plantation. Towards this he now made his way, stopping often to listen, but for the most part moving with confidence. With the air photographs memorised he knew pretty well where he was. In Singapore, too, he had had a long talk with the Chinese boy, and from him gathered a good deal of detailed information about the lie of the ground.

The airstrip, merely an area of hard ground, was some distance to his right, but he was not so much concerned with this as with the hangar, which he knew could be reached by following the edge of the plantation.

The native village, where Vandor's labourers lived, was some distance beyond that. Vandor's house, which stood alone, was on a hillside which he could see silhouetted against the sky beyond the trees.

By the time he had reached the plantation mosquitoes were making their presence felt.

For this he was prepared, and lost no time in smearing his hands and

face with insect repellent. He then looked at his watch. The time was three-thirty, which meant that he had about three hours of darkness to complete his mission and get clear. Making as little noise as possible on the soft ground he went on until he could make out the hangar looming in the gloom ahead. It struck him that it seemed to be getting darker, and gazing skyward he perceived the reason. A veil of cloud was being drawn across the moon.

This, he thought, was unfortunate, for he was relying on the moonlight to enable him to find his way about.

He went on and reached the hangar with only one incident, and that was not of a serious nature ; but still, with his nerves keyed up, as they always are on such occasions, he stiffened when a black shadow rose up in front of him and blundered away into the night.

It was, he saw at once, a buffalo, although whether it was wild, or a domestic beast strayed from its paddock, he did not know. Nor did he, now that it had gone, care very much.

He found the hangar to be a simple structure of canvas stretched over a wooden framework. The canvas, he noticed, had once been part of Japanese war stores. It was just enough to protect the machine from the weather.

There was no difficulty about getting in because the entrance consisted merely of curtains that could be drawn aside.

The Moth was there. As far as it was possible to judge it appeared to be in order. Biggles had a torch, and would have liked to make sure of this, because it was in order to survey a possible line of retreat, should he find himself in a tight corner, that he had troubled to go to the hangar at all. But to show a light was a risk he dare not take, so he went out again with the object of completing his mission in the shortest possible time. The moon, he was annoyed to find, was now no more than a pale glow in the sky. A few big drops of rain were falling.

Although he still carried the photograph of the place in his mind, to find the house was not an easy matter, and for some time he wandered up and down the footpaths, made by labourers working in

the plantations, without advancing far in the direction in which he knew the house to be.

However, at length he found the landmark which in the photograph he had supposed to be a brook, or a ditch. In fact, it turned out to be a jungle-lined ravine of unknown depth and about twelve yards across. After following this for some way, for in the dark there could be no question of crossing it, he found a bridge. He remembered this bridge. It was on the one track for vehicular traffic between the house and the outside world.

Having ascertained that there was no guard on it he crossed over, only to find again that the photographs were deceptive. What he had taken to be a level road, turning at a sharp angle from the bridge, was a short steep hill that ended in an open area in front of the house. This area fell away towards the track. Of the building itself he could see little. It was larger than he expected, and appeared to be something between a glorified European bungalow and a Chinese pagoda.

He was about to make his way to the east end of the building, where the ammunition was stored, when he heard a sound that puzzled him, and brought a frown to his forehead. It was the screech of a motor horn. Looking in the direction whence it came, which was beyond the track up which he had just come, he saw, moving through the trees, not one pair of headlights, but three. What this portended he did not even try to guess ; but as it was obvious that the vehicles were coming to the house he lost no time in getting into a position from which he could watch without being seen. The only cover available, although there was plenty of it, was in the luxuriant tropical shrubs and tree-ferns that in places overhung the open ground. Into these he pushed his way, although not without reluctance. There were plenty of fireflies, and these he did not mind ; he was thinking of snakes, centipedes, and other Venomous insects that might resent his sudden intrusion.

But his dominant sensations were irritation and frustration, because such an interruption as was now imminent, at such an hour, was outside his reckoning, and looked even then as if it might upset his plan. This was clear cut. He had intended to force an entrance to the ammunition dump, place a couple of time bombs, one explosive and the other incendiary, and retire. He would then merely have to make his way up to the reservoir and there wait for Ginger to come and pick

him up.

That it was not going to work out as easily as that was soon evident. He accepted the state of affairs philosophically. He knew from experience that plans seldom operate without a hitch.

The next development made him start, so little was he expecting it. This was the switching on of two overhead arc lamps suspended above the area in front of the house.

This was now turned into a pool of light, dazzling after the darkness.

Lights also appeared in the house. He was glad he had taken cover, for signs of activity at once appeared. A big Malay—or Biggles took him to be a Malay—stepped forward from the house and stood as if waiting. On him, from some low buildings that were evidently living quarters, converged a motley assortment of Oriental humanity. All were chattering like monkeys, but this ended abruptly when from the front door stepped a man, a white man in a suit of white drill. He gave the appearance of having dressed quickly. He was, Biggles suspected, Captain Langley Vandor, and as events were soon to prove, he was right. Lamenting that he had chosen such an unfortunate moment to arrive, Biggles could only wait and watch.

That the people under the lights were awaiting the arrival of the motor vehicles, now grinding up the slope in low gear, was obvious ; and Biggles himself turned his attention in that direction with no small curiosity. But when, presently, with a good deal of triumphant shouting, a lorry and two jeeps, crowded with men, arrived on the scene, he felt that he should have guessed what was afoot.

The lorry made a circuit of the open area and came to rest facing the direction from which it had come ; that is to say, just at the top of the slope, at the bottom of which was the bridge. The two jeeps, shedding some of their human cargo, went on, and disappeared from sight at the east end of the building, up a track which until then Biggles did not know existed. The area in front of the house now presented an animated picture.

Not fewer than a score of men were there, all talking at once,

although what was being said, Biggles, not knowing the language, had no idea. A more mixed assemblage he had never seen. There were Malays, Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, Tamils and mixed breeds, all of whom had evidently suspended racial hatreds in order to obtain plunder under a common banner of lawlessness with violence. Incongruously, they shared one superficial feature with Biggles, he noticed. The majority of them wore British battle dress, for the most part ill-fitting, which could only have been taken from the bodies of their victims. It did not take Biggles long to see the possibilities of this unpleasant circumstance.

Three men stood apart from the rest : Vandor, the big Malay, and a man of unknown nationality who was, Biggles thought, the leader of the new arrivals. Vandor was a rather stout, pompous little man, whose ancestry was betrayed by high cheek bones and eyes that were not quite straight.

By this time Biggles was in no doubt as to who these men were and what they were doing. The weapons they all carried were sufficient evidence of that. Here was a gang of bandits come to report progress or replenish their stores ; probably both. The lorry, he noticed, still carried the insignia of a British army unit ; it also showed signs of having been recently in the wars, for its woodwork had been holed and splintered by bullets.

Even so, Biggles was not prepared for what happened next. The man whom he had supposed to be the leader of the raiders walked over to the lorry and climbed in over the tailboard, which had been dropped. A moment later a body—or what Biggles took to be a body from the way it was handled—was flung out. The man who had thrown it out jumped down after it and kicked it. This brought the supposed body to its feet, not without difficulty, for, as Biggles now observed, the hands were tied together behind its back.

In spite of the clammy heat Biggles felt a chill creep over him as he realised that he was looking at a captured British soldier. What made the situation even more pathetic was the fact that he was little more than a boy. He appeared to be dazed by what was happening to him. A more lonely, hopeless figure, Biggles thought he had never seen, and his lips came together in a hard line as he watched him half dragged, half shoved, to where Vandor and the Malay were standing. Vandor, who had lit a cheroot, appeared to find great satisfaction in

the situation ; but it is unlikely that he would have been so self-assured could he have seen the expression on Biggles' face.

With a flourish of his cheroot Vandor turned away up a path that skirted the side of the house, which he entered through open french windows. The soldier was taken along behind him by the Malay. The other man hurried off shouting to some of his men.

Keeping in the undergrowth, regardless now of snakes, or water that drenched him every time he touched a palm frond, Biggles made his way, with some difficulty, parallel with the path to a point from which he could see inside the room. The big Malay was just leaving, a bunch of keys in his hand. Vandor was putting a heavy canvas bag into a metal safe. The prisoner, helpless, stood there, calmly awaiting the fate which he must have thought inevitable.

Biggles made his preparation swiftly. He took from his pocket a flat leather case.

Opening it, he selected a slim metal cylinder, and holding it to his ear, counted a number of clicks as he turned a milled screw. This, and the case, he returned to his pocket. From inside his blouse he took a hunting knife and stuck it through his belt. Then his hand went to his hip and came up holding an automatic.

In his heart he knew that what he purposed doing was wrong. His first consideration, he was aware, should be the fulfilment of his mission, which was the destruction of the ammunition dump. But against that he knew that if he abandoned the unlucky lad, standing wretched and forlorn a dozen paces from him, the face would haunt him for the rest of his days. He moved forward to the fringe of the palms and there paused to hear what Vandor was saying. The words, in

perfect English, reached him clearly, and the subject with which they dealt was appropriate to the situation.

"I see," Vandor was saying. "So you're not going to talk ? "

The boy did not answer.

"We have here," said Vandor airily, "ways to make the most obstinate people talk."

"But I tell you I don't know anything," blurted the boy desperately.

"We may be able to refresh your memory," replied Vandor, locking the safe, and turning to a desk on which lay a revolver.

"Officers don't tell privates what their plans are," muttered the boy.

"We shall see," returned Vandor, smiling unpleasantly.

Biggles had heard enough. Automatic in hand he stepped forward. "As you say, Vandor, we shall see," he said coldly. "You'd better keep your hands where I can see them because I'm waiting for an excuse to fill your dirty body with lead." He went on and picked up the revolver from the desk.

Vandor did not move. His eyes opened wide. His jaw dropped. Astonishment may have bereft him of the power of speech.

With his knife Biggles cut the cords that bound the soldier's hands.

"Keep your tail up, laddie," he said softly. "Let me know as soon as you can use your hands. Take time, but don't waste any."

"I'm all right," said the boy, new hope in his voice.

"Okay. I want you to do exactly as I tell you. Take this gun. Keep that rat covered. One move, one bleat, let him have it. If we're going for a Burton your job is to see that he comes too."

"Leave it to me," said the boy through his teeth.

"That's the spirit. I shan't be long. A shot will bring me back." Biggles strode off, taking the small but powerful demolition bomb from his pocket as he walked.

He took the back way to the east end of the building, where he found more activity than he expected. The double doors of a room of some size were wide open. A light was on, revealing a stock of ammunition boxes and other things. At the entrance a jeep was being loaded with petrol cans.

At the same time a man was filling the tank. The second jeep stood at the top of a short ramp apparently awaiting its turn. There was no one with it, all hands being concentrated on the jeep that was being loaded.

A mirthless smile curled Biggles' lips as he walked towards it, for this part of the game, at any rate, was in his hands. His battledress—or rather, the stolen uniforms worn by the bandits—may have done him a service, in that the men working on the lower jeep, if they saw him, may have taken him for a member of their gang. Be that as it may, no one challenged him. Reaching the jeep he simply took off the hand brake, whereupon the vehicle, being on a slope, started forward, fast gathering speed.

The men below saw it coming, as they were bound to, and a shout went up.

They could not have seen Biggles, for he was crouching behind it. His right arm went back, then swung forward. For a second the yellow light glinted on a little metal tube that whirled through the open doors into the room beyond.

Biggles did not wait for the result, Counting the seconds, he dashed back the way he had come. When he had counted five he flung himself flat and put his arms over his head, hands over his ears. He was only just in time. First came a sharp explosion, followed instantly by a terrific whoosh which he took to be the petrol catching fire. Hard upon that came a tremendous roar. Waiting only until the debris had finished rattling down—and there was plenty of that—Biggles

sprang up and ran on, no longer in darkness, but in a lurid glare that had its source at the east end of the building. Explosion followed explosion.

In the unholy light he saw a figure run into the room for which he was himself making—

the room where he had left the soldier. He reached it to see the big Malay, dagger in hand, creeping up behind the soldier who, his eyes being on Vandor, was unaware of his presence. Biggles did not hesitate. His pistol spat. The native stretched himself to his full height ; then his legs crumpled under him and he slumped like a wet sack dropping off a peg.

The soldier spun round with a gasp. Vandor, white-faced and round-eyed, started to move, but as Biggles' pistol whipped up again he flinched and stood still.

"Come on, laddie, let's get out of this," said Biggles crisply. To Vandor he rasped : "I'm hoping you'll come after us because I'm still waiting for that excuse to send you where you belong." He did, in fact, glance behind him as he left the room ; but Vandor was still standing there, as if petrified by the speed of these events.

"Where are we going ? " asked the soldier eagerly.

"Follow me and don't ask questions," answered Biggles tersely. "Guard the rear and plug anyone who tries to interfere. I haven't quite finished yet and this is no time or place for romantic notions of chivalry." He went on to the front of the house.

Here he found things easier than he expected. The lorry was still there.

There was no one with it, every-. one apparently having hurried to the end of the house where the fire was raging to a brisk accompaniment of exploding small-arms ammunition. Sparks were flying and stray bullets whistling in all directions.

Biggles walked quickly to the lorry, which he saw had been partly loaded with miscellaneous equipment. With the soldier standing guard he climbed into the seat, released the handbrake, started the engine, put it in gear and jumped down. As the vehicle started to move he tossed a bomb into the back of it.

From the cover of the palms that lined the track, as they watched it run out of control down the hill, Biggles remarked, grimly : "Whatever happens now they'll remember our visit."

"Are you telling me ? " replied the soldier fervently. "What's your name

? "

"Alan Macdonald."

"Fair enough. That name fits with hard fighting."

The lorry failed to achieve a miracle by keeping to the track at the bottom of the hill. It crashed through the wooden railings of the bridge, disappeared from sight, and banged and bumped its way to the bottom of the ravine. Then came an explosion. Orange flames leapt up to lick the overhanging tree-ferns.

"I think that'll about do," said Biggles evenly. "We'll see about getting home. This way."

Eyes alert and pistol ready for trouble he walked quickly towards the lower end of the footpath that led up to the reservoir —or at any rate, towards the place where the Chinese boy had told him he would find it.

This was behind a small power-house in a vegetable garden at the west end of the house. Just as they reached it however, Alan, who was watching the rear, touched Biggles on the arm. "Give me a minute, will you ? " he asked in a queer tone of voice.

Biggles stopped inside the nearest trees. "What's the idea ? "

Alan pointed. "You see that swine ? "

Looking back, Biggles saw, gesticulating where the lorry had stood, the leader of the party that had captured Alan. Vandor was there, and two or three others. "Which particular hog do you mean ? " he asked.

"The boss of the gang that ambushed us," answered Alan. "He shot my chum, Angus Gordon, in cold blood, when he was wounded."

"What about it ? "

"Where I come from we try to square these accounts. may never have another chance."

"Okay," agreed Biggles. "Go ahead, but don't be long." He understood how the boy was feeling.

Alan turned back.

Biggles sat down, his eyes on the group standing in the open. In the light of the fires now raging it was like a scene in a play. There was no question of hearing anything because the uproar at the end of the house, and the crackle of exploding cartridges in the ravine, drowned all other sounds. A faint smile crossed his face as he saw the man whom Alan had pointed out, stiffen, stumble and fall. The others ran. A bullet cut up the dirt at Vandor's feet—and another. Then he appeared to dive into the ground. The others of the party ran on and disappeared round the end of the building.

Presently Alan came back. He was breathing hard and there was a wild look in his eyes.

He tried to speak, but the only sound that came was something like a sob.

Biggles appeared not to notice it. "Nice work," he complimented. "Feel better after that ? "

"A lot," said Alan, shortly. "I used all my ammunition, though," he added.

"You'd never have found a better target," asserted Biggles. "Come on, we've some way to go and it's all uphill."

"Where I come from we've plenty of hills," stated Alan.

Nothing more was said. They set off up a narrow muddy path made slippery by the rain that had been falling on and off for some time.

If the truth must be told, although he did not mention this to Alan, Biggles was nothing like as happy as he pretended to be. After a disconcerting beginning the mission had gone off well, but the weather conditions had introduced a factor which he had not taken into account.

It had been fine when he started. But it was obvious that the monsoon had arrived. If it turned out to be only the advance guard of the real bad weather, so well and good. But if it was the monsoon proper, Ginger, and the others who were in reserve, would have a job to find the place—at all events, without flying very low, which would reveal their presence, and would, in hill country, be dangerous in itself. However, he went on, slipping and sliding and sweating in the sticky jungle heat, seizing upon any hand-hold to lessen the effort of climbing. It rained at intervals, sometimes heavily, sometimes only a drizzle. Rain water dripped monotonously from the pendant palm fronds. The overheated jungle steamed, although an occasional break in the clouds allowed a little wan light to trickle through.

After a while Biggles said : "Let's have a breather. This is heavy going." He sat down in the mud and with a handkerchief already wet mopped mud, sweat and mosquitoes, from his face. He told Alan where they were going, and why. While doing this he looked back down the path up which they had come. Marapang itself could not be seen, but the site was marked by a fierce glow from which rolled a steady cloud of smoke. Then his attention switched to several points of light, strung out and moving, and clearly defined.

"We'd better be moving," he said. "The blighters must have spotted

which way we went and are coming after us."

They went on, with frequent glances behind at the pursuing lights.

Dawn broke grey and cheerless before the top of the path was reached, but Biggles knew from the distance they had covered that it must be close.

When at last they came to it, they found they had arrived, as was to be expected, at the dam itself.

Biggles considered the sheet of water with a calculating eye. Ginger was not there.

"Have you any cookies left ? " asked Alan. "Yes," answered Biggles.

"What about sticking one in the dam ? That would wash out those blighters on the path and flood everything down below."

"It would also," said Biggles sadly, "leave my pilot with nothing but a sheet of mud to land on. I don't feel like walking home. Never allow your enthusiasm to outrun your intelligence, my lad. We'll move along for a bit."

Visibility, while not good, was not as bad as Biggles expected to find it. What was heartening, as time went on and the sun gained power, it improved rapidly. Biggles smiled as he looked at Alan, wondering what his mother would think could she see him, plastered with mud from head to foot. His own condition, he knew, was no better. He took a bar of chocolate from his pocket, broke it in halves and gave half to Alan, who voted it a slice of luck.

"By using your head and thinking in advance you can often arrange for little slices of luck," answered Biggles dryly. He looked back along the edge of the lake, but the ground was steaming, and visibility did not extend as far as the dam. They walked a little farther and then sat down to wait.

They heard the aircraft before they saw it. In fact, they heard it twice, but on neither occasion was it near them. Ginger should have been at the rendezvous at dawn, and Biggles could imagine him fuming as he groped about in the murk, trying to get a glimpse of the earth but not daring to come too low for fear of colliding with one of the peaks that occurred in the area. However, at last they heard it really low. "He's getting desperate," Biggles told his companion, and stood up, Very pistol in hand, ready to signal his position. A moment later the Skud came into view, a grey shadow in the tenuous mist that still floated up from the valleys. Biggles sent a red ball of fire across its nose, and smiled at the speed at which the aircraft turned. He waved, and had the satisfaction of seeing the machine rock its wings to indicate that he had been observed. The twin engines died, and the Skud began an S turn to lose height in order to come in.

At that moment, now that long visibility was not of paramount importance, the clouds parted ; the sun burst through, and the mist went up like a gigantic elevator. As if by magic the air was clear, so that everything within a mile was in plain view. The weather, which had done its best to make the operation difficult, had at last relented. Or so Biggles was justified in thinking.

An instant later a sudden noise of shouting exposed the fallacy of this belief. It seemed that the weather was still determined to be difficult.

Bad visibility having failed in its object, good visibility was turned on at the very moment when it could work mischief. It did this, as the shouting made apparent, by revealing them to a dozen or more men who were standing, and may have been standing for some time, at the place where the footpath emerged at the dam. With a brittle, "Look out ! " Biggles dived for the nearest cover. Alan went with him.

A glance revealed the Skud now gliding in, its keel nearly touching the water. It was this that gave Biggles the greatest cause for anxiety, for the machine was bound to come to the bank to pick them up, and the risk of it being hit at such close range was all too evident.

The bandits were coming on now, some firing their rifles as they ran, although from such wild shooting there was little to fear.

"I'll hold these fellows, or make them keep their heads down, while you get aboard,"

Biggles told Alan crisply. Without waiting for a reply, although the range was too long for accurate shooting, he emptied his automatic at the bandits. Slipping in another clip he again opened a rapid fire. This had the desired effect of forcing the enemy to seek cover, although it did not, of course, prevent them from returning the fire.

Biggles still had a card to play. He had two bombs left. After adjusting the fuses he ran forward, ducking and twisting, and hurled them into the enemy's position. Then he turned and raced for the machine, now taxiing in at a speed that threatened to drive it ashore.

As Alan waded out to meet it—for the water near the bank was shallow—it swung round in a smother of creamy foam. Then came two explosions, and in the few seconds' grace provided by the smoke, and no doubt by the confusion they must have caused, Biggles followed Alan into the aircraft.

The engines were roaring, and the machine accelerating even before he had got the door shut.

If there was any shooting he did not hear it. Ginger afterwards said there was. Anyway, no bullets touched the machine, and by the time Biggles was picking himself up—he was content at first to sit on the floor—the machine was airborne. He looked at Alan and grinned. "What you might call cutting it a bit fine," he observed.

"A bit too fine," returned Alan feelingly.

"No matter. We've done a good night's work and you'll have a tale to tell when you get home," declared Biggles. Then he laughed. "The only thing is, no one will believe you. I'

ll go and tell Ginger to push along. I don't know about you, but I could do with some breakfast."

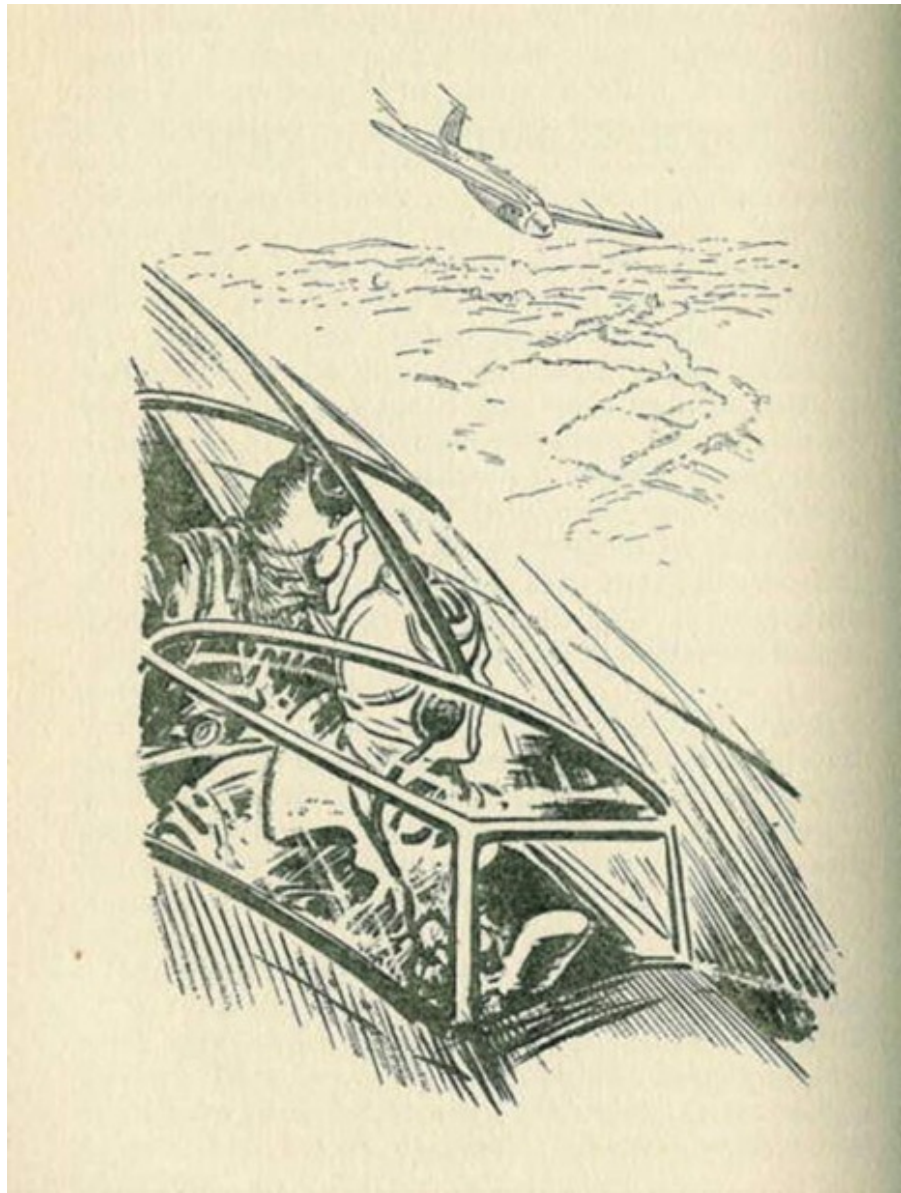
BIGGLES BAITs THE TRAP

" GINGER " Hebblethwaite glanced up as Biggles came into their office after a prolonged absence. "You've been a long time," he complained.

"What goes on ? "

"Why, getting restless again ? " was the bantering reply.

Ginger eyed a small area of blue sky framed by the window. "It struck me as a nice fine day for doing something exciting," he observed.



"Then let's go and do it," returned Biggles, reaching for his cap.

Ginger started. "What are we going to do ? " he demanded crisply.

Biggles smiled faintly. "We're going to do a little experimental work in that ancient pastime known as trailing a red herring."

Ginger looked pained. "Come clean," he protested.

"All right—but let's have a little less film slang," suggested Biggles.

"In plain English we're going to pinch the priceless pearls of the Rajah of Rantipanathat's all."

Ginger blinked. "You're going to what ? " "You heard what I said."

"Suppose you give me the gen," requested Ginger, slipping into R.A.F. jargon.

"All right ; here it is, as briefly as I can tell it," obliged Biggles, selecting a cigarette from his case and tapping it on the back of his hand. "A smart gang of jewel thieves has taken to flying about its business. I told you about that. I also told you that I was only waiting for Algy and Bertie to come back from leave in order to get cracking after them. But it happens that

the matter has suddenly become urgent, so I've had to get in touch with them to get them on the job. This is the position. You remember the big diamond robbery in Paris last week ? "

"Of course."

"The diamonds were in New York the following day, which can only mean that they were flown there. If we knew the type of machine being used by these crooks our job of catching them would be easy—but we don't. We haven't a clue. I'm hoping to get one today, and, with luck, perhaps nail the crooks into the bargain."

"And just how are you going to do that ? "

"I'll tell you. The New York Police report that one of the men suspected of being connected with the jewel thieves is now in London. If one is here it seems likely that they're all here. Why have they come here ? "

"To do another job ? "

" Exactly : and I think I know what it is," said Biggles seriously. "The Rajah of Rantipana is on his way to this country from India for the Far East Conference. He is due to land at Gatwick Airport this afternoon at two-thirty. He has with him his cele-brated pearls. Everyone knows that because the story has appeared in the newspapers."

"Why publish the story in the newspapers ? " grumbled Ginger.

"It was published at my request," replied Biggles, tapping the ash off his cigarette.

Ginger's eyes opened wide. Then he nodded slowly. I get it. You wanted to bring the jewel thieves over here ? "

"Just so. The pearls, in a blue morocco case, will be carried by one of the Rajah's attendants."

"The case should be chained to his wrist."

"The Frenchman carrying the diamonds last week tried that and got his hand cut off at the wrist, as a result of which he died," said Biggles coldly. "The attendant carrying the pearls on this occasion will be a Scotland Yard man. He will allow me to steal them. In other words, I hope to beat the crooks to it. Having got the pearls I shall sprint across the airfield to where you will be sitting in the cockpit of our Mosquito, with the engines ticking over. As I jump in you will take off."

Ginger blinked. "And what good will that do ? "

The crooks will be on the spot, with everything nicely planned, no doubt

; and also, unless I am on the wrong track, with an aircraft waiting.

What they won't be prepared for is my cutting in first. When they've recovered from the shock, what will they do ? "

"Shoot you, probably," answered Ginger grimly.

"I shall endeavour to avoid an event so melancholy, you may be sure," returned Biggles smiling. "They will certainly be very angry and resent my interference. When they've grasped the horrid truth they'll set off after us."

Ginger nodded slowly. "So we set off, flat out, with the Rajah's regalia, hotly pursued by the thwarted thugs ? "

"That's the idea."

"And where do I head for—assuming I get off the ground with the loot ? "

"I've considered that very carefully," replied Biggles. "We'll make for Margon, which is a nice quiet little airfield near Lyons, in France, where we shall repair to the refreshment room and have a snack. There, if my plan works, we shall presently be interrupted by the crooks, who will try to get what they failed to get at Gatwick."

"How will they know where we've gone ? "

"They'll spot the course we take. In the air I shall slow down to a speed that will nearly enable them to overtake us—but not quite."

"And what happens when they demand the pearls ?"

"I shall pull the string and they'll find themselves in the bag. We must get them redhanded, so to speak."

"Aren't you taking a chance ? I mean—how many of these crooks are there ?

"

"That's one of the things I want to find out." "You'll look silly if they bump you off and get the pearls," declared Ginger.

"If I'm bumped off I shall be past caring what I look like," answered Biggles lightly.

"Are you taking a gun ? "

"I am. You'd better take yours, too ; I have an idea you may need it. But come on. Let's get cracking. We haven't too much time."

At two-thirty precisely, dead on schedule, the big blue and silver monoplane privately owned by the Rajah of Rantipana, touched its wheels on the broad Gatwick runway, swung round and taxied slowly to the airport buildings where a little group of people, airport officers, government representatives, reporters and cameramen, stood waiting.

Among the latter, a camera hanging on his chest, was Biggles.

For the tenth time his eyes swept round the aerodrome, trying to decide which of the several machines in sight was most likely to be the one in which he was chiefly interested—the crooks' transport. Some, belonging to air operating companies, he was able to dismiss at once ; also the grey-painted police Mosquito, with engines idling and Ginger's head just visible through the windscreen. Of the others, his interest was focused mainly on three American machines, two of them converted war types, and the other, a racy-looking light transport Volting, a single engine high-wing monoplane, painted dark red with a white flash running aft from the engine cowling. A man, possibly the pilot or a member of the crew, was leaning nonchalantly against

the port wing tip. Through the open door a second man could be seen moving inside.

Further inspection of the aircraft was prevented by the arrival of the

Rajah and his entourage at the reception gate. The spectators surged nearer and crowded round the central figures—the Rajah himself, his secretary, and a white man who carried a portfolio in one hand and a blue morrocco case in the other. A bouquet was presented.

Greetings were exchanged. Cameras went up. Shutters clicked.

Biggles pushed his way to the front, his camera raised. An instant later came a blinding flash followed by a dense cloud of white smoke which enveloped visitors and spectators alike in its reeking coils.

The chorus of startled cries and shouts of alarm that arose were heard plainly by Ginger, sitting in the cockpit of the Mosquito a hundred yards away. Watching, with nerves braced, he saw Biggles burst out of the crowd, the blue case in his left hand, and start to run, followed closely by another man who groped in his pocket as he ran. The man's hand came up. A pistol cracked. Biggles swerved, but raced on towards the Mosquito, swerving again to spoil the aim of the man who was shooting at him.

By this time Ginger's pistol was out ; but he hesitated to shoot for fear that Biggles'

pursuer was a member of the Rajah's staff, or a genuine detective. Then, seeing that Biggles was in real danger, he fired two quick shots into the ground close to the feet of the pursuer. This had the desired effect. The man stopped, hesitated, then fired at the aircraft, without hitting it, however.

Biggles raced up, panting, and took a flying leap into the Mosquito. "Get going," he said tersely, dropping into the spare seat.

Ginger was ready. The motors bellowed. The Mosquito quivered as it moved.

The tail lifted, and a moment later the machine was in the air, skimming low over the boundary fence. For a few seconds Ginger held the aircraft down ; then he eased the control column back in a climbing turn and took up the prearranged course.

"What happened ? " he demanded. "Were the crooks there ? "

"They certainly were," answered Biggles, who, with the jewel case on his lap, was still breathing heavily. "They nearly beat me to it. I was just moving in when there was a bang as a smoke bomb exploded. Actually, it helped me. I grabbed the case and bolted."

"Who was that fellow after you—the little dark chap ? "

"I think he was one of the crooks, but I'm not sure. He made a grab for the case just as I did—in fact we both got hold of it together ; but I socked him on the jaw, got clear and ran. Go easy while I have a look behind. We mustn't get too far in front in case they lose sight of us."

Biggles studied the sky astern for a minute before he spoke again. Then he said : " Okay ; they're after us. It's the red-painted Volting. I thought that might be the machine. Keep going, but don't let them get too close in case they've machine guns aboard."

Ginger settled down for the run to France.

The flight passed without incident. The Volting hung on the Mosquito's tail, but Ginger, in the faster machine, took care that it was never close enough to do any mischief.

Eventually, with the Margon airfield on the horizon, under Biggles'

instruction Ginger, as if suddenly aware that he was being pursued, forged on ahead, and while the American machine was still a speck in the sky, landed and taxied up to the airport buildings. The only other machine on the landing ground was a drab-looking Tiger Moth.

The airport manager was waiting. It turned out that, at Biggles's request, he had been warned by Scotland Yard, via Police Headquarters in Paris, of what was afoot, so when Biggles had shown his credentials he announced that he was ready to co-operate in any way. Biggles thanked him, told him that there was nothing he could do and would be well advised to keep out of the way. Then, leaving the Mosquito where it stood, taking the blue jewel case with him Biggles led the way to the refreshment room.

There were two other people present, sitting at separate tables, each with tea in front of him. One was a parson, presumably a French cure, and the other, a mechanic of some sort, dressed in blue overalls with beret pulled on at a rakish angle. After a perfunctory glance Ginger paid no further attention to them, his interest being taken up by the Volting which, he could see through the window, had just landed and was taxiing tail up towards the Mosquito.

A neat waitress came from behind the refreshment counter and asked the travellers what they would like. Biggles ordered tea and some biscuits, which were quickly brought.

Biggles sipped his tea and took a bite out of a biscuit.

Ginger, with his eye on the door, said softly, "Here they are. There are three of them.

They've left their motor ticking over so I imagine the pilot is still in the machine. That makes four of them altogether."

"Okay," murmured Biggles. "Keep calm."

Ginger reached for a biscuit, but his mind was certainly not on food. He was wondering just how they would be approached by the jewel thieves—for that they would be approached he had no doubt whatever.

His mental question was soon answered. The three newcomers, one of whom he recognised instantly as the little dark man who had chased Biggles at Gatwick, strode up to the table at which they sat. Biggles did not move. He appeared to be unaware of their presence.

One of the men, presumably the leader, as he was slightly in front, a tall good looking man with cold grey eyes and a hard mouth, spoke briefly but to the point. "Come on," he said harshly. "Hand 'em over."

Biggles glanced up. "Are you talking to me ? " "I am," was the snapped

reply.

"What do you want ? " inquired Biggles.

"You know what I want—hand them over," rapped out the man. And as he spoke he reached out for the blue case which lay on a spare chair close to the tea table.

But Biggles was first. He put his right hand firmly on the case. "That is not your property," he said quietly.

"Quit quibbling," snarled the man, and knocking Biggles' hand aside he snatched up the case.

Biggles shrugged. " And just what do you think you are going to find in that case ? " he inquired evenly.

There was a moment of brittle silence, and Ginger braced himself for the clash which he felt was imminent.

The little dark man spoke in a voice with a curious foreign accent. "Open der case and make sure de pearls are in it," he rasped.

Biggles shook his head sadly. "If it's the Rajah's pearls you're looking for you're on the wrong track," he said.

Again a nasty silence fell. Nobody spoke. Then, moving quickly, with his eyes on Biggles' face, the man who held the case snapped it open. It was empty. He drew a deep breath. "Where are they ? " he grated through his teeth.

"In the strong room at the Savoy Hotel, London, I imagine, by this time,"

replied Biggles calmly. "At my suggestion the pearls were put in another bag before this pretty blue case left the machine."

Another silence. The tall man stared at Biggles as if fascinated. "Who are you ? " he managed to get out.

"Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth of Scotland Yard," replied Biggles.

"Are you coming quietly ? "

The tall man had a pistol out in a flash. Cursing viciously he pointed the muzzle at Biggles' head. A shot crashed. But Biggles did not move a muscle. Instead, the tall man staggered, clutching at a shattered arm while his pistol thudded on the floor.

Ginger, amazed, looked round, and saw that the man whom he had taken to be a priest was standing up, a smoking revolver in his hand and a monocle in his eye. Ginger gasped as he recognised Air Constable Bertie Lissie.

The mechanic was also on his feet, pistol at the ready. Ginger recognised Algy Lacey.

The pilot of the crook aircraft, having apparently heard the shot, dashed into the room. "

What goes on ? " he demanded.

"You'll find out," answered Biggles curtly. "Stand still, I want you too.

And let me warn you all, if you still fancy your chance of getting away, that there is a cordon of French police round the building—all burning to avenge their comrade whom you murdered last week in Paris."

Nobody moved.

Biggles stood up and took out his handcuffs. Algy and Bertie closed in.

The handcuffs clicked. Biggles whistled. A French inspector of police, followed by several gendarmes, bustled in.

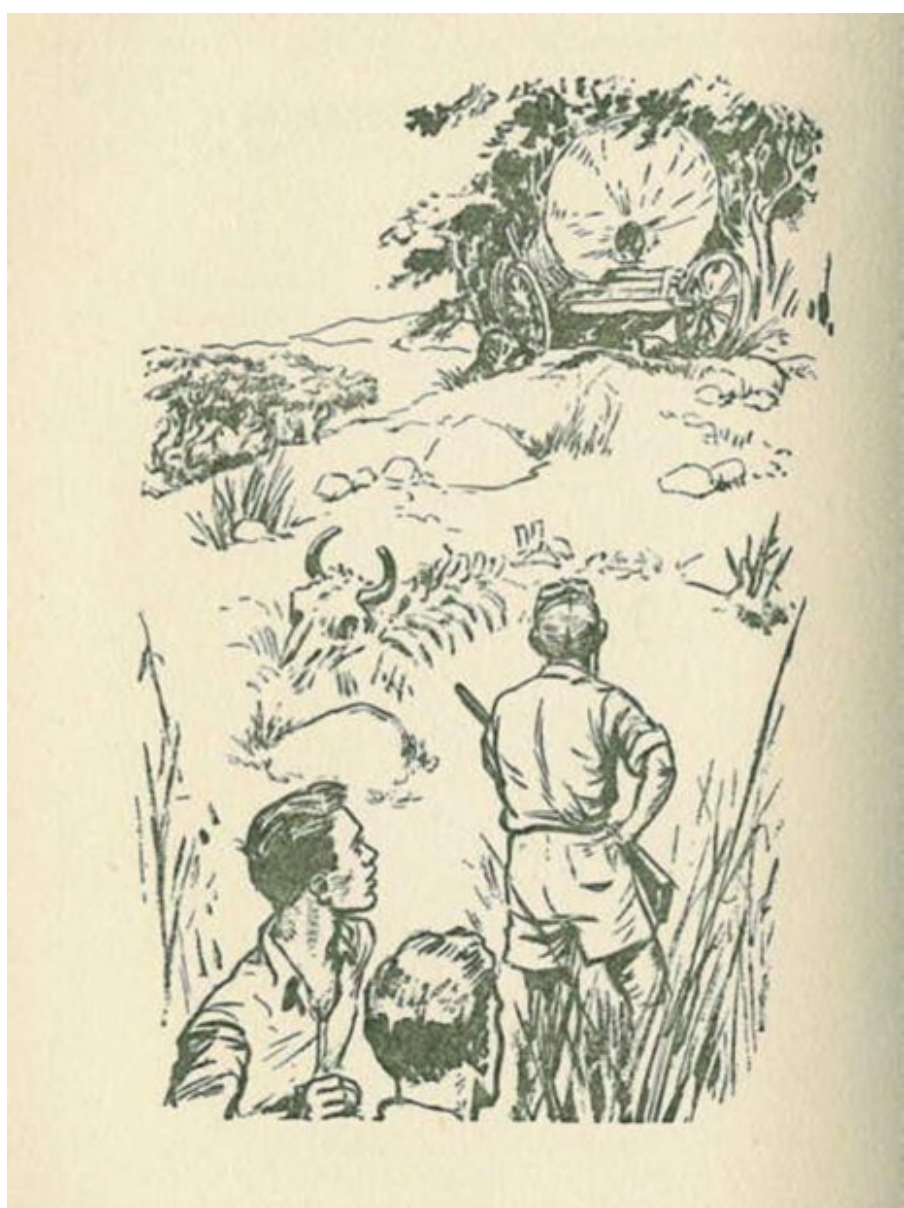
"Here are your men, Monsieur," said Biggles. "I'll leave them with you for the time being. I shall have to be getting back to Scotland Yard. He turned to the others with a faint smile. "All the same, I think we have time to finish our tea before we go."

Ginger sat down limply. "Well I'm dashed," he breathed. "I said it was a fine day for doing something exciting."

"And as it turned out, it was," returned Biggles, reaching for the teapot.

AFRICAN ASSIGNMENT

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND, Assistant Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard, looked up from some papers on his desk as Biggles walked in and closed the door behind him. "Morning Bigglesworth," he greeted curtly.



" 'Morning, sir."

" Busy ? "

"Not frantically, at the moment."

"How would you like a run out to Central Africa ? "

Biggles' face expressed no surprise as he took a cigarette from the box the Air Commodore had pushed forward. "What is it this time ? " he inquired.

"I don't know," answered the Air Commodore frankly. "That's what I want you to find out. I have here a report from the Colonial Office. They don't know, either. I happened to be dining with the Colonial Secretary last night and he hinted pretty broadly that he would like to know."

"I gather an aircraft comes into the picture ? " "In a vague sort of way."

"Tell me how an aircraft can be vague ? " invited Biggles. "Either there is one or there isn't."

"Sit down and I'll give you the gen."

Biggles pulled up a chair and lit his cigarette.

"The area with which we are concerned," began the Air Commodore, "is a small native reserve just inside our territory near the boundaries of Kenya, French Equatorial Africa and the Belgian Congo. It is known as the Ubeni Reserve. It is occupied by a tribe of that name who live mostly in a village of that name."

Biggles smiled faintly. "That simplifies the name aspect, anyhow."

"The village is situated on the shore of Lake Kulu, a piece of water about forty miles long which occupies the centre of the reserve,"

continued the Air Commodore. "These people apparently, have always been a bit backward. A few were recruited as labourers for the mines at Kimberley some time ago, but not liking work they returned home. We'

ve never had any serious trouble in the Reserve, largely, perhaps,

because the Head Game Ranger has closed his eyes to the poaching of protected game. There's nothing unusual about that. Most natives are poachers by nature, but we don't mind as long as the thing is kept within reasonable limits. On the whole the Ubeni are a surly lot, for which reason they seldom have visitors—I mean white men. So much for the place and the people.

"The first indication that things were not normal came in a report from Captain Callingham, the Assistant Game Ranger into whose district the Ubeni Reserve falls. He looks in about once a year just to remind the people that he exists ; for Ubeni, you must understand, is not an easy place to reach on foot. Being a government official, Callingham has never been what you might call welcomed with open arms ; but on the last occasion he went there, some months ago, he detected an atmosphere of definite hostility. There was no actual violence, but Callingham knew from experience that he was on thin ice, and, wisely perhaps, retired.

The reason for such a reception was not disclosed, but that there was one we need not doubt. Something, or someone, was responsible, and Callingham, wise in such matters, suspected the influence of a white man."

"Was a white man known to be in the district at the time ? " inquired Biggles.

"Yes, but as far as the behaviour of the natives is concerned he can be ruled out, since he was, there is reason to suppose, their victim. He was a well known character, a Scot by the name of Angus Soutar, a widower, and a trader of the old school who, being thoroughly trustworthy, worked under a government licence. His native name was Sootoo. He has a son, Thomas, a boy of sixteen. This lad, having been educated in England, joined his father about six months ago on what was to be his first trading trip. I suppose the old man was getting on in years and wanted to teach his boy the business with a view to his taking over when he himself was past it. It's a hard life, this trekking round the outlying districts with no home but an ox wagon, bartering trade goods for anything of a commercial nature. Still, apparently the old man liked the life. He, like the Game Ranger, looked in at Ubeni about once a year. He called there a little while ago and he hasn't been seen since. His son came home, and it was the story he told that

has resulted in this conversation." The Air Commodore reached for another cigarette before he continued.

"About two months ago, this boy, Tommy Soutar, turned up, alone and on foot, at Juba, in Equatoria, with a strange story, but one that was confirmed by his condition, for he was pretty well all in. He said that with his father he had been to the Ubeni Reserve where they had found the natives off-hand to the point of being insolent. It was clear that they were not wanted. It was the first time that the old man had met with such a reception and he was upset about it. Some of the natives appeared to be drunk, and, in fact some empty gin bottles were seen. Some had bedecked themselves with empty sardine tins, jam jars, and similar hardware, and the conclusion Soutar came to was that either a white man had given them these things in return for services rendered, or else they had encountered and robbed someone. Perceiving that if he stayed he might himself be robbed, Soutar decided to move on.

"They went on, Tommy says, for about ten miles, following the edge of the lake to keep in touch with

water for their oxen, and then outspanned for the night. Just at sundown a native, a Ubeni, appeared on their trail. His manner, the boy described as furtive, as if he was afraid of being followed. The old man spoke to him in his own language, which the boy did not understand. As a result of a conversation Angus Soutar went into the wagon, brought out a considerable quantity of tobacco, and gave it to the fellow. In return, Tommy noticed, he received a small oblong tin with a blue lid. The native departed. The old man took the tin into the wagon. Tommy never saw it again. He has no idea of what was in it. It struck him that his father seemed worried, for he sat, deep in thought, as if pondering a difficult problem. At last he got up and said : There's dirty work going on at Ubeni and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Wait here till I come back.' Then, as an afterthought, he added : If I don't come back go to the District Officer.' With that he went off in the direction of Ubeni.

Tommy never saw him again.

"The boy waited up all night. When at dawn his father had not returned he set off to look for him. He went, he thinks, about three or four miles, and then came upon something that threw him into a

panic—as well it might. It was the native who had come to their camp. He was dead—speared to death. The tobacco had gone. Tommy ran back to the wagon. He was sure now that disaster had overtaken his father, but what could he do, alone ?

He couldn't take on the whole tribe of Ubeni singlehanded. In the end he did the most sensible thing—the thing his father had advised. He inspanned the oxen and drove off in the hope of finding help.

"Later that day he saw something which has resulted in my telling you this story. It was an aeroplane. It was well out over the lake, coming from the direction of Ubeni. It disappeared to the north."

"He didn't by any chance recognise the type ? " interposed Biggles.

"No. He was not particularly concerned with it beyond the fact that he wondered what it was doing there. But let me finish the boy's story. That night came the final calamity.

The oxen were attacked by lions, and those that weren't killed, stampeded. Without any means of transport Tommy did the only thing he could do. He loaded himself up with all the food he could carry and set off on foot. A fortnight later, near starvation, he was lucky to meet some friendly natives who took him to the nearest white settlement, from where he was passed on to Juba, where he told his story."

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. "And what does all this add up to ? "

The Air Commodore shrugged. "Simply this, Something is going on at Ubeni.

There's a chance that an aircraft may be involved. If it is, that's where you come in."

"Is there any reason why the District Officer shouldn't go out, with an escort, to probe the mystery, and find out what happened to Soutar ? "

"Yes. It would be impossible for an official safari to approach the

Reserve without its presence becoming known, in which case the culprits would vanish and the Ubeni would pretend to know nothing."

"From the evidence it rather looks as if the kernel of this particular nut might be found in the box that Soutar accepted from the native in payment for tobacco. Did the boy make no effort to find it ? "

"No. He was too concerned about his father and his own safety to bother about what then seemed a mere detail."

"Where is Tommy Soutar now ? "

"He's still at Juba, working on a farm there. His statement was forwarded to Whitehall with a request for instructions. The business is really outside our province, but it struck me that you might slip down as the quickest way of clearing the thing up. Your arrival on the spot would at least be unexpected. Juba is on the main route to the Cape so you could be there in two or three days. It would take the police a month to reach the place from Nairobi. If you took a marine aircraft you could use the lake as a landing ground. That's why I mentioned it."

Biggles considered the matter for a minute. "The proposition is still a bit vague," he averred. "What's the main issue ? I mean, am I to find Soutar, or merely ascertain why the Ubeni have turned nasty ? "

"If," answered the Air Commodore slowly, "you can ascertain who is supplying these people with gin, and why, you may find the answer to both questions. It would be interesting to know if the aircraft young Soutar saw comes into the picture."

"I take it you've no official record of an aircraft, military or civil, being in the area ? "

"None. The R.A.F. have no station near, and no civil permit has been issued or I should have notified you for your records."

Biggles toyed with a cigarette. "Where did the Steiners get their

pictures ? "

"The Steiners ? Oh, you mean the people who are showing that wild animal film at the Poly Cinema."

"Yes. They call it The Heart Of Africa. According to the papers they're an adventure loving husband and wife who waffle round the wild spots of the earth in a flying boat taking wonderful shots of wild animals.

They're going back to Africa again shortly. It was the air angle that interested me."

"Quite so. I don't know much about them, except that last year they made a picture in India with our blessing."

"Theirs might have been the machine that Tommy saw."

The Air Commodore shook his head. "I doubt it. At least, they didn't ask for a permit, so presumably for their African picture they made their base in French or Belgian territory."

"Neither of which is far from Ubeni."

"True enough. They might have got off their course a trifle. But I don't think you need worry about them. After all, their business relies on keeping friendly with the natives, not by antagonising them."

Biggles nodded. "Still, they have an aircraft." He got up. "I'll take Ginger with me and start for Juba in the morning to get young Soutar's story at first hand. Afterwards I may have a look at this Ubeni country."

Four days later, on the arid airfield at Juba, sitting on an empty oil drum near a police Saro amphibian aircraft that he had flown out, Biggles listened to the story of Tommy Soutar, the boy who had lost his father.

He was a fair, sun-bronzed, intelligent-looking lad who, outwardly at

any rate, showed no signs of his recent misadventure. Ginger had been to the farm where he worked to fetch him while Biggles refuelled the aircraft.

The story provided little new in the way of information. Tommy regretted that he would not recognise the mysterious aircraft again if he saw it ; and, in answer to another question, stated that he could not even guess what was in the little tin box given to his father by the native.

"When you set off on foot you left the wagon just as it was, with everything in it ? "

queried Biggles.

"Except what food I could carry," answered Tommy.

"Then presumably it's still there. Could you find the place again ? "

"Easily."

"You mean, there was a conspicuous landmark ? "

"Yes, the lake. I kept near it for water, as my father had done. A narrow creek juts out, shaped like an elbow. I had stopped in a glade in some thorn trees about a hundred yards from the end of it, hoping any natives who came alone wouldn't notice the wagon. The lions must have been in the scrub."

"If I flew you to the lake could you show me this place ? " "yes;

"Will you come ? "

"Of course."

"Then let's go," said Biggles, rising. "We can do nothing more here. An

hour should see us there. There should be no difficulty in finding the lake, any way. You can sit next to me and point out the creek when we come to it."

In five minutes the machine was in the air, and in just over an hour the first objective was in view—a long narrow sheet of placid, reed-fringed water, that sprawled across an otherwise featureless landscape. Biggles struck it at the northern end. Under Tommy's direction he flew south, and following the eastern shore came upon the creek to which reference had been made. The village of Ubeni, Tommy said, was about twenty miles farther on, as near as he could judge.

Cutting his engines Biggles glided low over the proposed landing ground, unruffled except for ripples where some hippos sank out of sight as the machine approached.

Turning, he made a second run, and this time the keel slashed a creamy wake down the surface of the water towards the inner end of the creek. As the machine lost way, a burst of engine sent it on until its bows swished in the reeds that lined the bank. Some rose-pink flamingoes took wing from a nearby mudflat, otherwise nothing appeared to be disturbed.

"Ware crocodiles," warned Biggles, as Ginger stepped out into a foot of water to make the machine fast.

Ginger took heed, but the danger did not materialise. The others joined him on the bank, Biggles carrying a rifle, in case, as he said, the lions that had attacked the oxen were still in the vicinity. If they were, nothing was seen of them.

"This way," said Tommy, walking towards an area of flat topped trees that straggled in the dry grass no great distance away.

In a few minutes the melancholy proof of Tommy's story was before them.

The dismembered skeleton of a bullock lay in the grass. Just beyond,

the abandoned wagon stood silent and forlorn.

"That was my home for six months," remarked Tommy sadly, as they walked up to it.

A disappointment awaited them. As they neared the vehicle Tommy suddenly ran forward with a cry of dismay. Explanation was unnecessary, for what he had seen was apparent to all. The wagon was empty. Of its mixed contents not one article remained.

"The natives must have found it after all ! " exclaimed Tommy bitterly.

"I was afraid of that," said Biggles evenly. "Being so near to Ubeni someone was almost certain to spot it."

"Even so, unless the robbers knew for certain that my father was dead they would hardly dare to touch his things," declared Tommy miserably.

"Where did your father usually keep his valuables?" inquired Biggles. "I imagine he sometimes carried quite a lot of money and he wouldn't just leave it lying about ? "

"I don't care about the money," said Tommy huskily.

"I wasn't thinking of money particularly," replied Biggles. "It struck me that he might have put the tin box given to him by the native in the same place."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Tommy. "He hid his money in a little locker under a loose board over the forward axle—here." Tommy stooped, lifted the board, and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. "They didn't find it ! " he cried. "It's still here ! " "The money ? "

"And the box." Tommy lifted a small metal box with a blue-painted lid. As he handed it to Biggles something inside rattled. Biggles prised it

open, for it was the sort that a rubber lining inside the rim holds the lid secure and airtight. Into the palm of his left hand he poured a number of tiny stones. The largest was about the size of a pea. He held it up. As the light fell on it, in some strange way it seemed to glow.

"What on earth are they ? " asked Ginger.

"Diamonds," answered Biggles softly. "Uncut diamonds."

For a minute no one spoke. Then Biggles went on. "So now we know. I thought this little box might hold the key to the mystery. At any rate, it's turned the spotlight on it. This is the position as I see it now.

The Ubeni have struck diamonds. Maybe they were found by the men who were recruited for work in the mines at Kimberley. They'd probably recognise diamondiferous gravel if they saw it. They'd also know it is illegal to buy and sell diamonds—not that that would stop them selling any they had, given the chance. To whom could they sell them in a place like this ?

Obviously, it must have been a white man. From the evidence, it rather looks as if he traded them gin, jam and sardines, for stones. The natives, knowing they were breaking the law, would discourage other white visitors—as we know they did. In that attitude they would of course be encouraged by the white man who was making a good thing out of them.

Tommy's father, being honest, was given the cold shoulder. But there's usually a fly in that sort of ointment. In this case it was the native who, being short of tobacco, followed the wagon to get some. He offered diamonds for it." Biggles looked at Tommy.

"Your father would smell such an obvious rat instantly, but rather than make a fuss he took the stones. Then, bravely but unwisely, I think, he went back to find out where they were coming from ; or, perhaps, to try to locate the crook who was handing out the gin.

In doing so he lost his life. The native who was after tobacco must have been spotted and followed. His fellow tribesmen, furious that he had divulged their secret, killed him.

Your father may have run into the same crowd. Maybe they were drunk. That is conjecture, but something of the sort must have happened."

Tommy nodded. "That's about it."

"Had they found you no doubt you would have shared the same fate," averred Biggles. "

Curiously enough, the lions may have saved you. By starting off on foot you gave them the slip, although as we can see they found the wagon."

"The thing is to find this white man, who is really at the bottom of the trouble," said Ginger in a hard voice.

Biggles held up the tin. "This, originally, held cigarettes—anunusual brand, too, judging from the name on the lid. Did your father smoke cigarettes, Tommy ?"

"Never. Only tobacco."

"In that case, as this box is in shop-new condition, we can assume that it belongs to the fellow who supplied the gin. It's hard to see how the native could have got it any other way. When we find the man who smokes this particular brand of cigarettes, and there can't be many in this part of the world, we'll ask him some questions."

"Africa is a big place to start looking for a man smoking a particular brand of cigarettes,"

Ginger pointed out.

"We shan't have far to go I fancy," said Biggles dryly.

"You mean—Ubeni ? "

"Of course."

"He may not be there now."

"If he isn't he'll come back. Oh yes, he'll come back—while there are diamonds to be had for gin and jam," declared Biggles cynically.

"Which means that you're thinking of going to Ubeni ? "

"It's the one place where we can be sure of finding this crook—sooner or later."

"The natives will kill you as they did my father," protested Tommy.

"I shall do my best to avoid any such unpleasantness," averred Biggles.

"From the air we could soon spot a wagon heading in this direction," said Tommy eagerly.

Biggles smiled. "And from the ground we should see an aeroplane coming this way just as easily," he said softly. "When our man comes along he'll be in a hurry. Crooks are always in a hurry. A wagon is a slow way of getting over the ground. Let's go back to the machine. I want to show you something, Tommy. You might as well bring that money that belonged to your father. There's no point in leaving it there."

They all returned to the aircraft. From the pocket in his instrument panel Biggles took a large envelope. Still speaking to Tommy he said :
"I gather you've travelled quite a long way beside this lake ? "

"Yes. Dad and I struck it to the south, and followed the bank to keep near water."

"Very well," continued Biggles. "I want you to look at these photographs and tell me if you recognise any place shown in them. Never mind the animals, the hippos and crocs, and so on. Concentrate on the scenery." As he spoke Biggles drew from the envelope a batch of prints.

Ginger looked surprised. "Where did you get those ? " he demanded.

"In London," answered Biggles, vaguely.

Tommy looked hard at several photographs before he stopped. Then he held one up. "I know this place," he declared.

"Are you positive ? "

" Absolutely."

" Where is it ? "

"A mile or two below Ubeni village. We spent a night there. I remember it well because I've never seen so many hippos as there were there. There they are, in the photo. I walked out on that very fallen tree to get a bucket of water."

"Thank you," acknowledged Biggles. "We needn't bother with the rest.

That's all I wanted to know." He replaced the photographs.

"Is there some secret about this ? "inquired Ginger, with gentle sarcasm.

"No," admitted Biggles. "There's a travel film showing in London called The Heart Of Africa. It was made by a man and woman named Steiner. It's a good film. I saw it the night before we left. I liked it so much that I went to the publicity agent and bought some enlargements of the shots—

particularly those showing scenery. I thought there was a chance that I might recognise some of the places when I got here."

"In what way can that help us ? "

"In this way," rejoined Biggles. "The Steiners had no permit to operate in British territory. They did not apply for one. They say they were nowhere near British territory when they were in Africa. Their picture, the film states, was made in the Belgian Congo.

That's a lie. They came here, otherwise they could not have taken a photo of the place Tommy has identified. Why should they lie about a little thing like that ? People who lie in little things will always lie in big ones."

"Because they didn't want it known that they had been here."

"Good. Go to the top of the class. Their lie has now rebounded on them, as lies usually do."

"You think it was their machine I saw ? " put in Tommy.

"Let us say it seems highly probable."

"In that case," surmised Ginger, "It could have been these people Steiner who handed out the booze to the Ubeni in return for diamonds ? "

"It could. I'm not saying it was . . . not yet. But had their visit here been clean and above board there would have been no need for them to lie."

"And you think they'll come back ? "

"I don't think. I know. They've announced in London that they are

returning to Africa to make another film. There may be money in films, but pictures are chicken feed compared with diamonds. I made enquiries and found they were scheduled to leave within a week after we left."

"Which way are they coming ? "

"I don't know. In that respect, wisely perhaps, they kept their plans to themselves. If they come here we shall see them."

"Does that mean you're going to wait to see if they come here ? "

" It does."

"So that's why you packed all that canned food on board ! I thought it was a precaution against an emergency landing."

Biggles laughed. "What's this, if it isn't an emergency landing ? "

"Okay. And what exactly is the drill ? "questioned Ginger.

Biggles took a cigarette from his case and tapped it pensively on the back of his hand. "

That's not an easy matter to decide. Of course, there are plenty of things we could do, but most of them bristle with difficulties. If one native can produce several diamonds the place must be littered with them.

If they get loose on the market they'll cause no end of mischief by lowering the value of all the other diamonds in the world. That's why the government maintains such a strict control. Another risk is, when the Ubeni realise their value they'll start selling them for cash and buy rifles with the money. That mustn't happen."

"But surely you could prevent that by letting the authorities know what's going on ? "

argued Ginger.

"That's true up to a point," replied Biggles. "But official action is slow. Suppose the fellow who knows about the stones slips in and buys the lot ? Once he gets away with them how could we hope to find them ? If I was sure he'd stay in British territory I'd follow him and nab him with the goods on him. But once he leaves here he might go anywhere. Remember, we're close to French and Belgian territory. Once the fellow got across the frontier we could do nothing about it. The best way might be to grab him in Ubeni village, but there are difficulties about that, too. The natives would take a hand. I don't want to finish up on the point of a spear. That would start a punitive war, and Raymond wouldn't thank us for that. There is this about it. If the Steiners do come here I shall soon know whether it's pictures or pebbles they are after."

" How ? "

"If they really wanted pictures they'd be here for weeks. If it's diamonds, they'll be gone in a few hours. That's the dickens of it. Once they're away we've lost them—and the diamonds."

"So what ? "

Biggles stroked his chin. "Short of force, the occasion seems to call for headwork. Give me a little while to think it over."

Sitting on the ground, with a cigarette smouldering between his fingers, Biggles gazed across the shimmering lake. It took him twenty minutes to reach a decision ; but having done so his manner became brisk. He beckoned Ginger to one side. "I'm not going to carry the responsibility for this," he said tersely. "I haven't said so to Tommy, but I'm by no means convinced that his father is dead. He may be a prisoner in the village. Natives think twice before they murder a white man.

Should Tommy's father be alive, one bad move on our part might cost him his life. I'm going to ask the Air Commodore for instructions. The Steiners, if they're coming, won't be here for some days, so we have a

little leeway in the matter of time. I want you to make flat out for Egypt. Go to the Air Officer Commanding, R.A.F. Headquarters, show him your papers and ask for contact with Raymond, on service radio. Explain the position to him. Having got his instructions come back here. I'll do my best to keep the situation under control in the meantime. Tommy will stay with me. We'll unload some stores and make camp in the wagon."

Ginger nodded. "Okay. I'll hit the breeze as fast as I can. I ought to be back here in three days if there's no delay in getting hold of the Air Commodore."

"Good enough," confirmed Biggles. "Get cracking. By the way, if you don't find me here when you get back, give me a few hours and then make for home to report fully to Raymond."

"Does that mean you'll have gone to Ubeni ? "

"Probably. I shall have to go there if this diamond buyer on wings turns up before you get back. I daren't risk letting him get away with the loot."

Half an hour later the Saro was in the air, heading north. Biggles and Tommy were at work unloading food stores and making camp.

On the afternoon of the third day after Ginger's departure Biggles was sitting on a shaft of the wagon, talking to Tommy, when he broke off suddenly, his head in a listening position. "Here comes somebody, and it doesn't sound like Ginger," he said sharply. "

Ginger would be flying low, if not actually gliding in. The machine we can hear is pretty high, which means it still has some way to go."

"There it is ! " Tommy pointed to an aircraft moving swiftly across the dome of implacable blue overhead. It was well out over the lake, coming from a north-westerly direction, the direction of the Belgian Congo.

Biggles regarded it critically. "That's the Steiner's machine," he announced. "It's a Cornell flying boat, the same machine they used on their previous trips. From the course they're on it looks as if they're heading for Ubeni. They've wasted no time getting here. I didn't expect them just yet. Maybe they had a reason for being in a hurry. I'm afraid I shall have to leave you alone for a bit."

Tommy looked surprised. "What are you going to do ? "

"I'm going to Ubeni."

"They'll kill you."

"Possibly." Biggles smiled. "I'm a policeman," he reminded. "Being killed is a risk every policeman must take occasionally if he does his job."

After all, I'm paid to arrest law breakers, not run away from them."

"I'll come with you."

Biggles shook his head. "That's sporting of you, Tommy, but I have a job for you. You'll stay here to meet Ginger when he arrives, and tell him where I've gone, and why. He won't be surprised. You should be safe enough here. I'll leave you the rifle."

"But this is Africa ! You can't stroll about as if you were in England !

" cried Tommy, aghast. "What will you do if you meet a lion ? "

"That will depend on what the lion does," answered Biggles, with mock seriousness.

"What about the natives ? "

"If they're bent on mischief a rifle wouldn't make any difference. On the other hand, the sight of one might be enough to set them off, if they're in an ugly mood. I've an automatic in my pocket should things

get really sticky."

"Ubeni is a long way," Tommy pointed out. "It'll be dark before you get there."

"So much the better," returned Biggles. "There will be less chance of my arrival being noticed. If I wait until tomorrow our birds may have flown.

That's a risk I daren't take.

Well, I'll be getting along. Take care of yourself and don't go far away.

Ginger should be along any time now." With a wave Biggles set off on his long trek, taking a line roughly parallel with the side of the lake.

For an hour he saw no sign of wild life except innumerable water fowl and hippos in the lake, and some waterbuck that made off at his approach. A little later, however, a lion stood up suddenly in the dry grass not far away. Biggles walked on. The lion watched him suspiciously, but without actual hostility. After a final stare it made off, unhurriedly, with frequent glances behind, in the opposite direction. About dusk, with still five miles to go, he heard lions roaring in the distance, but he did not see them.

He now proceeded with more caution, keeping a sharp lookout for natives, but to his satisfaction, for he hoped to reach his objective unobserved, he saw none. He finished his journey under a brilliant African moon. By that time he felt reasonably safe from surprise attack, knowing that the natives would by now be in their village, the fires of which he could see at no great distance.

Before reaching it he made a discovery which, in view of what he knew, interested him immensely. In the ordinary way it would hardly have been noticed, for it was merely a water-course, shrunk by drought to a trickle which seeped through a gravelly beach.

But on either side of the water the gravel had been thrown into heaps, and, as there appeared to be no other reason for such labour, he supposed it to be the place from which the diamonds were being won.

Work had of course been abandoned for the night, so with barely a pause he went on until the beehive-shaped huts of the village loomed darkly in front of him. A little to the right of it the moon glistened on the tranquil water of the lake.

On it, close against the bank, an aircraft rested motionless on its own reflected image. He recognised it as the machine he had seen earlier in the day. This told him that the Steiners were there, whatever their business might be. He could see no one near the machine, although there seemed to be a good deal of activity in the village, mostly of a boisterous nature, as if the natives were in great good humour. A frown knitted Biggles'

forehead as he listened, for such unusual behaviour at such an hour, he suspected, was the result of hard liquor.

Moving on, another object came into view. It was a tent, pitched perhaps a hundred yards beyond the perimeter of the huts. A strong light glowed through the canvas. From the fact that there were no natives near it Biggles judged that the Steiners had already concluded their business.

For a moment he hesitated, surveying the scene to make sure that he had not been observed ; then, making a wide detour, he approached the tent from the rear. As he drew near he could hear the voices of a man and woman in low but animated conversation.

Taking out his penknife, moving slowly and with the greatest possible care, he pressed the point of the blade through the canvas, and after withdrawing it, applied an eye to the incision thus made.

For perhaps two minutes he stood motionless. Then, with a curious expression on his face he straightened himself, and after another scrutiny of the village backed away to some scrub. From there, still moving with infinite caution, he made his way to the aircraft. It rocked a little as he stepped aboard, but the ripples soon died away. He watched the village until it fell quiet. The light in the tent went out. Leg-weary, he settled down in the cockpit to rest.

Dawn broke with its daily miracle of an African sunrise. Land and

water came to life.

Biggles stretched limbs that had become cramped, and looking through the windscreen saw that the village was astir. A native woman went to the lake for water. A man, squatting, began sharpening his spear with a stone. A white man appeared outside the tent with a folding washstand, and hanging a small mirror on the canvas proceeded to shave. Presently a woman, dressed in a sweater, slacks and mosquito boots, came out, carrying a Primus stove. Having pumped it up she lighted it, put a kettle on to boil, and retired. The man, having finished his ablutions, also went inside. The woman fetched the kettle when it boiled. All this Biggles watched without particular interest. He was more concerned with the village, and was relieved to note that the natives kept their distance from the tent. He was even more relieved when a number of them, carrying spears and shields, strode away in single file, apparently on a hunting foray.

He now left the machine and walked without haste to the tent. He went straight to the open entrance and looked inside. "Good morning," he greeted. "Mind if I come in ? "

Without waiting for an answer he took a pace forward.

Neither the man nor the woman, who were seated

taking breakfast at a folding camp table, answered. They stared, motionless, in the positions in which Biggles' appearance had found them.

Eventually the man lowered his fork. " Er—yes—er—come in," he stammered.

"I gather you weren't expecting visitors ? " said Biggles evenly.

"No—that is—not exactly." The man spoke with a pronounced accent.

"You are Mr. and Mrs. Steiner, I believe ? " went on Biggles.

"Yes, that's right," confirmed the man jerkily, with a swift glance at his wife. "Who have I the pleasure of addressing ? "

"It may not be altogether a pleasure," returned Biggles dispassionately.

"My name is Bigglesworth. I am a police inspector from Scotland Yard. It will not, I think, be necessary for me to tell you why I am here ? "

The woman found her voice. Her English was better than the man's. "I don't know what you're talking about," she declared with asperity. "What do you want with us ? "

"I want you to consider yourselves under arrest on several charges, one of which is illicit diamond buying," answered Biggles. "I hope, in your own interests, that you will behave sensibly."

There was another brief silence, tense with expectancy.

It was broken by the man. "Such nonsense ! " he scoffed. "What made you think we had diamonds ? "

"D'you happen to have a cigarette on you ? " inquired Biggles.

The man produced a tin—a small tin with a blue lid.

"As a matter of detail it was a tin like that which led me to suspect it," said Biggles. "I must warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence—"

"Take no notice of him, Karl," burst out the woman. "He can't prove a thing ! " Her hand crept towards a holstered revolver that hung on the back of her chair.

"That line of argument won't help you, Mrs. Steiner," said Biggles quietly. "Neither will violence."

"I can explain everything," blurted the man, who seemed more unnerved than his wife.

"The court will be pleased to hear that," asserted Biggles.

The woman suddenly snatched up the revolver and levelled it. "Now what have you got to say ? " she sneered.

"I have nothing to add to what I have already said," replied Biggles imperturbably. "

Except, of course, that by resisting arrest you are only making matters worse for yourself," he added.

It may have been that Biggles' nonchalant manner carried weight. At all events, the woman lowered the revolver although she still held it in her hand. "You'll have a job to find any diamonds here," she said bitingly.

Biggles smiled faintly. "I happen to know where they are."

"How do you know that ? "

"I watched you sorting them last night."

The woman's lips became a thin, bloodless line. Turning on her husband in a fury, and speaking in German, she snapped : "I told you we should have finished off that old man right away. He's responsible for this ! "

"It may be a good thing for both of you if Angus Soutar is still alive," said Biggles, in the same language. "If he's dead you may find yourselves involved in a charge of murder."

"He's still alive," muttered Steiner, returning to English. "We had

nothing to do with that.

It was the Chief. Here he comes now."

The woman laughed unpleasantly. "Yes, we'll hear what he has to say about this."

Biggles glanced over his shoulder. A tall, powerful-looking native, carrying a short, broad-bladed spear, was walking towards the tent, a string of his men following.

Speaking to Steiner Biggles said. "My business for the moment is with you, not him. I've given you my advice. Are you coming with me or are you going to make trouble ? "

"Where are your men ? " asked Steiner.

"Some way from here."

"Does that mean walking ? "

"For a distance, yes."

"Why not let me fly you in my plane ? " offered Steiner, with a curious gleam in his eyes.

"Yes," urged the woman, eagerly.

"I don't like that idea very much," said Biggles, almost apologetically.

"I might fall out—

if you decided you didn't like my company."

"Smart guy," rasped the woman. "Come on, Karl. Let's go. He can't stop us. The Chief will deal with him. In ten minutes we can be in Belgian territory. He can't touch us there.

"

"Yes, that may be the best way," said Steiner slowly, his eyes on Biggles' face.

"It may not be such an easy way as you imagine," averred Biggles. "You see, I took the precaution of immobilising your machine before I came to the tent. The keel is resting on the mud and there's a foot of water in the cabin."

The hate that sprang into the woman's eyes left Biggles in no doubt as to how she felt about that. What she actually did was something for which he was not prepared.

Snatching up a small bag from the table she dashed outside and flung its contents into the long grass over a wide area. "There's your evidence ! "

she grated. "Now go and find it."

Biggles shook his head sadly. "That's the first time in my life I've seen anyone throw away a handful of diamonds."

"It'll be the last, too, if I have my way," flamed the woman. She spun round to the tall native who was now standing at the entrance of the tent, obviously at a loss to know what was happening. "This man is a policeman ! "she shouted. "He has come to take you away and put you in jail ! "

To what extent the Chief understood English Biggles did not know ; but it was evident from his expression that, even if he did not fully grasp the situation, he realised that Biggles was an enemy. He half raised his spear threateningly.

"Kill him ! " cried the woman. She seemed on the verge of hysteria.

"Shut up Hilda ! " snapped Steiner, whose nerve appeared to be cracking.

Biggles looked the Chief straight in the eye. "You bring Sootoo," he ordered sternly.

The Chief blinked, as if things were going too fast for his primitive brain.

"He's going to hang you ! " shouted the woman. "Quiet, Hilda," said Steiner, almost plaintively. The Chief turned to the door and surveyed the landscape. Turning back to Biggles he said: "Where safari?" "He hasn't any men ! " cried Mrs. Steiner. "He's alone ! "

The Chief raised his spear, and thereafter things happened faster than they can be described. Biggles' automatic appeared in his hand. A quick movement behind him brought him round, sidestepping as he turned. Almost simultaneously Mrs. Steiner's revolver spat, the report sounding strangely flat in the enclosed space. The Chief flinched. His eyes opened wide. The spear drooped and slipped from his hand. Then, quite slowly, he sank to the ground. Silence fell.

Cordite smoke reeked. Mrs. Steiner stared as if fascinated at the man she had shot ; and still she stared, unprotesting, as Biggles took the revolver from her fingers and put it in his pocket.

Steiner, ashen-faced, was the first to speak. "You fool," he muttered thickly. "They'll kill us all now."

This seemed likely. Natives, muttering, were crowding near the entrance.

And the note of the muttering was rising, growing fiercer in tone.

"Stand still, both of you," ordered Biggles curtly, and turned to face the mob. But before he could speak again the noise faded suddenly to

a sullen hiss. This, too, died, as a wave dies on a shingle beach. All heads turned towards the lake, faces uplifted, as into the sultry silence crept a new and even more significant sound. It was the vibrant drone of aircraft engines, distant as yet, but swelling swiftly in volume.

"My men are coming now," said Biggles quietly.

The natives, who apparently had already realised it, were beginning to back away. Some broke into a run. A spear was thrown but it did no harm.

The retreat became a stampede.

It was not until Biggles stepped clear of the tent that he fully understood why. Coming up the lake was not the one aircraft he expected, but two. The Saro was leading. Behind it, looking majestic in its size and power, came a four-engined flying boat wearing R.A.

F. insignia. The roar of motors died abruptly as the machines lost height to land.

Mrs. Steiner, her passion spent, buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Her husband looked on helplessly, miserably.

Biggles dropped on his knees beside the Chief and found the bullet wound in his chest. "

He isn't dead," he told Steiner, "but not being a doctor I can't say what his chances are.

Maybe the troops have brought a doctor with them. Wait here." He went out and walked towards the lake, where the machines were now taxiing towards the shore. The Saro was first in. Ginger and Tommy jumped out. From the cabin door of the big machine emerged an R.A.F. officer, followed closely by a file of airmen carrying rifles.

"It's all over bar the shouting," Biggles told Ginger as he ran up. "You timed your arrival nicely. Things were beginning to look ugly. Where

did you collect the Air Force ? "

"The Air Commodore organised that with H.Q. Middle East," answered Ginger. "I waited for them at Entebbe and brought them along. We landed at the creek, but when Tommy told me where you were we came right on."

Biggles turned to the officer. "Have you got a doctor with you ? "

"Yes."

"Good. There's a job for him in the tent. There are two people there.

Take care of them till I come back, but I don't think they'll give you any trouble. They're in plenty already."

Biggles turned to Tommy. "Come with me," he requested, and walked towards the village.

They had not far to go, for by this time the village had been evacuated in a panic and the man Biggles hoped to find came staggering towards them. At least, so Biggles judged from the behaviour of Tommy, who ran forward with a shout of, " Dad ! "

Biggles lit a cigarette while the reunion was effected. Then, observing the feeble state the old man was in, he remarked : "The sooner we get your father to civilization the better, I think. There's no need for us to hang about here, anyway. Let's get along." He turned back towards the tent.

Little remains to be told. Angus Soutar and the

wounded Chief were flown forthwith to Egypt for medical treatment. Tommy accompanied his father, who was soon well enough to return to his old occupation.

Fortunately for Mrs. Steiner the Chief survived, although he was not

allowed to return to his people for some time. By then a guard had been put over the diamond diggings.

Karl Steiner wisely made a clean breast of the whole affair, describing how, while searching for subjects for photography, he had called at Ubeni, where he had been offered diamonds. He confessed that he had succumbed to temptation and bartered gin and other stores for them. He still had the original parcel in his London house. They were taken over by the police. His big mistake was going back for more, and although he did not say so it was clear that for this his wife had been mainly responsible. He escaped with a heavy fine, but Mrs. Steiner, on a more serious charge of attempted murder, spent the next year of her life in prison.

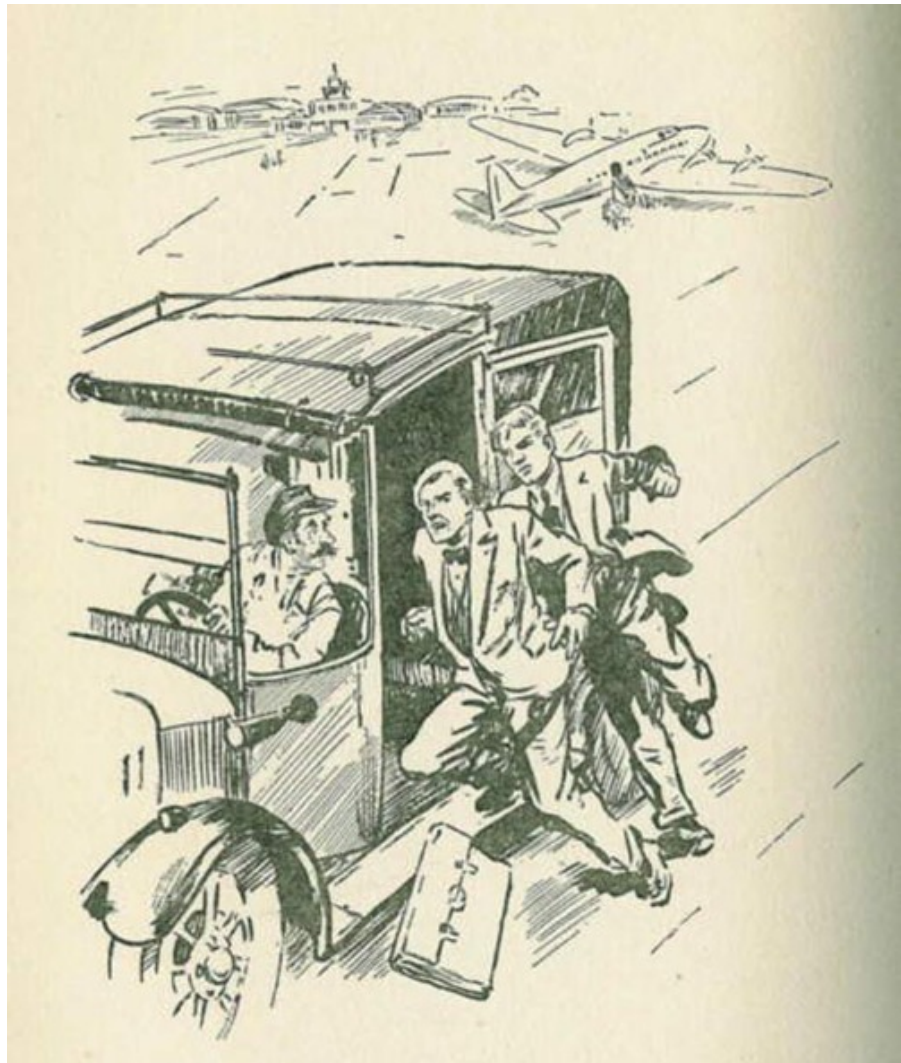
ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

THE Air Police "Proctor" aircraft climbed slowly, on test, fifteen thousand feet above its home airfield in Surrey, which could sometimes be seen through breaks in a layer of filmy summer cloud. Biggles sat at the controls, his eyes moving thoughtfully over the instrument panel. Beside him, Ginger, with two-way radio earphones in position, also watched the dials with interest.

"She seems to be all right now," remarked Biggles.

Ginger did not comment. His head turned a trifle so that his eyes met those of his chief. "

There's an urgent signal coming through," he said, reaching for his note pad. "It's Algy speaking." He listened for a minute or two, making notes,



and then reported : " Algy says the Air Commodore is on the phone. We've got to grab the pilot of an Auster Autocrat, registration, G-KXRY. The machine belongs to Inter-avian Hire Service. It left Croydon five minutes ago."

"Get the rest of the gen," ordered Biggles, altering course a trifle.

Ginger listened again and resumed : "The pilot is named Lester Wolfe.

He's a cypher clerk at the War Office. He's bolted with some vital documents. A warning was sent to all ports and airfields, but it was

too late. Wolfe had just left Croydon."

"Did he tell Interavian where he was going ? "

"He said he was going to Glasgow, but he was last seen heading south. The documents concern Western Union defence plans. The Air Commodore says they must be recovered at any cost. Algy says there's a deuce of a flap going on about them."

"Sounds as if the fellow's making for the Continent," opined Biggles.

"Are his papers in order ? "

Ginger passed on the question. "Yes," he replied presently. " Interavian say his papers were okay. The Air Ministry is on the job and all stations are trying to pick the Auster up by radar."

"Okay," replied Biggles. "Keep your eyes skinned. If the machine headed south we shouldn't be far from its track. Ask Algy to ask the Air Commodore what he wants me to do. Obviously we can't do anything while the Auster is airborne."

There was another pause. Then Ginger answered. "Take any steps to recover the papers.

We've got to get them back at any cost. Algy says we're to get the man if we can, but the papers are the most important. They make a bulky packet.

Wolfe was carrying a portfolio, so presumably they're in it."

Five minutes passed and Ginger spoke again. " Hello—yes ? " he said sharply. Then, to Biggles : "Radar reports an Auster approaching the coast between Brighton and Worthing."

" That's better," replied Biggles. "We'll have a look at him. With speed and height of this bird we should soon be able to pick him up." The

nose of the Proctor swung a little, and dipped. The needle of the air speed indicator crept up the dial. "It looks as if he's making for France,"

went on Biggles. "Is the Air Commodore asking France to take a hand ?

You'd better find out so that we know what we're doing."

Ginger made the inquiry, then looked up. "The answer is no. Algy says if the papers fall into other hands, even for an hour, they could no longer be regarded as secret and two years work will have gone west. There seems to be a terrific flap going on about the whole business."

"Okay," said Biggles. "Tell Algy to expect us when he sees us. Find out how much petrol the Auster had in its tanks."

Ginger put the question. "The machine is the long-range type, and started topped up," he reported.

"Which means, if my memory serves me, that it has an endurance of five hundred miles,"

observed Biggles. "We can beat it there, anyhow, I mean, if we can find it we shall be with it when it lands—wherever that may be. Good thing we started with full tanks."

The Proctor droned on, heading south, over broken cloud which, as often happens, dispersed when the English Channel was reached.

It was Ginger who spotted the Auster. His roving eyes picked up a tiny speck, far below, that might have been a water spider crawling towards the vast, hedge-less fields of Northern France. "There he is ! "he said sharply. "At any rate, there's a small machine, and not very fast."

Biggles dived steeply towards the aircraft indicated.

Five minutes sufficed to confirm Ginger's opinion. Not only was the machine revealed to be an Auster, but it carried the registration letters of the aircraft chartered by the absconding clerk.

"Our problem now," remarked Biggles, as he took up a position well above and behind the Auster, "is how to get our hands on the papers. It's anybody's guess what Wolfe will do next. He may land anywhere. He may have arranged to meet an accomplice somewhere."

"What's his idea do you suppose ? " asked Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. "Unless he's a fanatic, inspired by misguided patriotic motives, the answer probably is money. Those papers he's grabbed would be worth a good deal to some people. I'd say he knows where he can sell them. Anyhow, he seems to know where he's going, so we can take it that his plan was cut and dried before he did a bolt."

Nothing more was said for some time. Then Biggles observed : "Unless he's drifted off his course he's not going to Paris. He's too far west."

This was eventually confirmed. The slight haze that hung over the French capital could be seen far away to the east, but still the Auster held on, now flying on a course that had become slightly east of south.

Another hour passed, with no change in the relative positions of the two machines.

"Do you think he's seen us, and has realised that he's being followed ?
"

queried Ginger.

"I think it's very unlikely," returned Biggles. "I've kept pretty well in his blind spot.

Moreover, as he got off with a flying start, so to speak, he'd hardly

expect to be followed.

It just happened that we were in the air, otherwise it's unlikely that we should have caught up with him so soon. I'll tell you something else.

Either our bird doesn't know the country very well or he's a novice at the game."

"What makes you think that ? "

"He's not flying a compass course. He's following the main road you can see below. That'

s Route Nationale Seven—the big main road to the south of France."

"Could he be making for Marseilles ? "

"He may be, eventually, but he couldn't make it without an intermediate landing for more petrol. Unless he has a carnet he may have a job to get juice. It begins to look more as if he was making for Bron, the airport for Lyons."

Events confirmed Biggles' guess. The big airport of Central France, with its name in huge white letters, came into view. Several passenger machines were standing on the concrete apron. The Auster turned in, and apparently having received permission to land, went down.

"Now what ? " muttered Ginger, as Biggles followed the Auster in.

"It's a bit difficult to know what to do for the best," admitted Biggles, with his eyes on the Auster, from which the pilot, dressed in an ordinary blue lounge suit and carrying a portfolio under his arm, had alighted.

"Well, there's our man," he added. "If we're quick I think we have a chance here. Get out and try to snatch that portfolio. If you get it dash back here and we'll skip. The Air Commodore can do the explaining to the French authorities afterwards."

Biggles taxied the Proctor nearer to the control station, and stopped, but without switching off. Ginger jumped down and walked briskly towards the runaway clerk, who, from his casual manner, saw nothing significant in this.

Then the unexpected threw all Ginger's ideas into confusion. He had assumed, naturally, that Wolfe was going to the control office to check in. In doing this he had to pass close to a French Bellatrix air liner which, with its engines idling was taking in passengers.

One of these, a stoutish, pale-faced man wearing a black beret, suddenly stepped aside.

As Wolfe passed him he handed him the portfolio. Not a word was spoken.

Wolfe walked on. The man with the portfolio turned quickly and entered the cabin of the big machine, leaving Ginger, who was within a score of paces of him, completely taken aback by the speed and unexpectedness of the development. Even so, he perceived that it was a perfect piece of timing, and obviously part of a carefully prearranged plan.

For a moment Ginger hesitated. There was now, he saw, only one chance of recovering the papers. Should the passenger machine take off—he had no idea of its destination—

the portfolio would disappear for ever. He took the one chance to save them. Casually flipping his flying licence to the attendant, as if it were a travel ticket, he went into the machine. There were several unoccupied seats. He chose one behind the man with the beret. The portfolio was on his lap.

Ginger's hand was moving to grab it, and his muscles were tensed ready to bolt, when the cabin door was slammed. The engines growled. The aircraft vibrated, and began moving slowly into position to take off.

With a quick intake of breath Ginger sank back, trembling slightly from the excitement of the moment ; but as there was obviously nothing more he could do for the time being he relaxed, trying to recover his equanimity.

Looking through the side window he saw the Proctor, with Biggles, still in the cockpit, looking at him. Biggles raised a hand in a signal that might have meant anything, but Ginger took it to mean simply that Biggles had seen what had happened.

The Bellatrix took off. The man in the beret put the portfolio on the seat beside him. It was within easy reach of Ginger, but for all he could do it might as well have been a mile away. If he snatched it there was no means of disposing of it ; nor would there be until the machine landed.

Where this was to be he had not the faintest idea. True, the pilot was taking up a course for the south, but this meant little ; he might be going to Marseilles, but he might equally well be going to the Balearic Islands, or even Algiers, five hundred miles away on the other side of the Mediterranean.

The rolling valley of the Rhone, with its sun-drenched vineyards, began to slide away astern. Ginger stared out of the window, hoping to see the Proctor ; but his view was limited and he saw nothing of it.

The Bellatrix landed at Marignane, the land and marine airport of Marseilles. Ginger knew the pilot's intention some time before he actually landed ; the way the machine was handled told him that ; and his eyes returned to the portfolio for he now determined to grab it and bolt the moment the cabin door was opened.

To his disgust the opportunity did not arise. From the way the man in the beret picked up the portfolio and tucked it under his arm he might have read Ginger's thoughts.

Was the man going to get out, or was he going on ? was now the vital question ; for at this stage Ginger's eyes fell on the label of a piece of luggage near him. It was consigned, he observed with a twinge of consternation, to Gao, in the heart of French West Africa.

He began to wonder where the chase was going to end.

The man in the beret prepared to get out. He stood up. As the cabin door was opened he moved towards it. Ginger did the same thing. Again his nerves and muscles were braced for action the moment they were on firm ground. One or two other passengers who were also getting out jostled him from behind.

At the cabin door appeared a man in uniform. "Tickets, if you please," he requested—in French, of course.

Ginger's heart sank, although this obstacle was not unexpected.

The man in the beret gave up his ticket and passed on. Ginger took the only course open to him, short of causing a commotion by trying to force a passage. Producing his International Police Pass he explained as quickly as possible why he was travelling without a ticket. This inevitably took a minute or two. The ticket inspector was not unreasonable, but as he had never seen a police pass before he had some excuse for regarding it with suspicion.

Ginger, in a fever of impatience, still with his eyes on the black beret, now on its way to the airport buildings, did his best to explain. Still the ticket inspector seemed disinclined to let him through.

It seems likely that Ginger would have lost his man but for what he took to be a stroke of luck. A senior official appeared, walking briskly to the spot. In desperation Ginger started to explain, but to his surprise and delight the man smiled and stopped him with a gesture. "Pass monsieur," he said courteously.

Ginger needed no second invitation. He did not walk. He ran.

He had, of course, to go through the booking hall. One swift glance revealed that the man was not there. With sinking heart, in something like a panic, he dashed on, and saw him just stepping into a taxi—for at Marseilles the airport is fifteen miles from the town. One foot was already on the step. Perceiving that it was now or never Ginger did

not stop. He charged. The man in the beret had his back to him ; but the taxi driver saw him coming, and supposing, presumably, that he was seeking transport to the town, shouted that he was engaged.

Still Ginger did not stop. He charged as if he had been on a football field. His full weight caught the man under the shoulder and the result was what might have been expected, particularly as the man had only one foot on the ground, the other being on the step of the taxi. He was knocked sideways with no small force, and bounced from the forward wing of the car on to the dusty road. The portfolio flew out of his hand.

Ginger snatched it up in a wild scoop, without stopping, and raced on heedless of shouts.

He had no idea of where he was going. His one concern was to remove himself with all possible speed from the spot. A pistol cracked, and the whistle of the bullet made him swerve towards the airfield. More shots followed. Where the bullets went he did not know. Dodging to spoil the marksman's aim, he ran along the perimeter of the airfield without wasting time by looking behind him.

A roar over his head made him glance up, however. An aircraft was coming in to land.

To his joy and relief he saw it was the Proctor. Turning at right angles he raced after it, being left, of course, far behind. Even so, as the machine, with its wheels on the ground, quickly lost speed, he soon closed the gap. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a number of other people running out from the airport buildings.

The Proctor turned towards them. Yelling and waving Ginger dashed across the front of its nose. Then Biggles saw him—for the first time, as he afterwards explained. He opened the cabin door. Panting, Ginger flung the portfolio inside and scrambled in himself. "Get weaving ! " he shouted.

Biggles closed the door. The engine roared, and the aircraft sped like an arrow across the sandy airfield.

Still breathing heavily Ginger got into the second pilot's seat. "Phew!

That was a slice of cake," he gasped.

"What was ? " demanded Biggles.

"You turning up like you did."

"You didn't imagine that I was lying down at Bron having a nap, did you ?

" inquired Biggles.

"I thought you might follow, but I couldn't see you," explained Ginger.

"I had a busy five minutes before I set off after you," stated Biggles.

"Doing what ? "

"What do you suppose ? Having ascertained that the Bellatrix was going to land at Marseilles I rang up the airport superintendent at Marignane, told him you were travelling without a ticket, and why. He promised to let you through, if you wanted to get out."

Ginger's eyes opened wide. "So that was why he was so obliging ! I thought it was a stroke of luck."

"It doesn't do to rely too much on luck," said Biggles lightly. "No matter. You've got the documents. I'll send a signal to the Air Commodore from Bron, to put his mind at rest."

While we're there we'll have a bite of lunch."

"I call that," declared Ginger, "a very good idea."

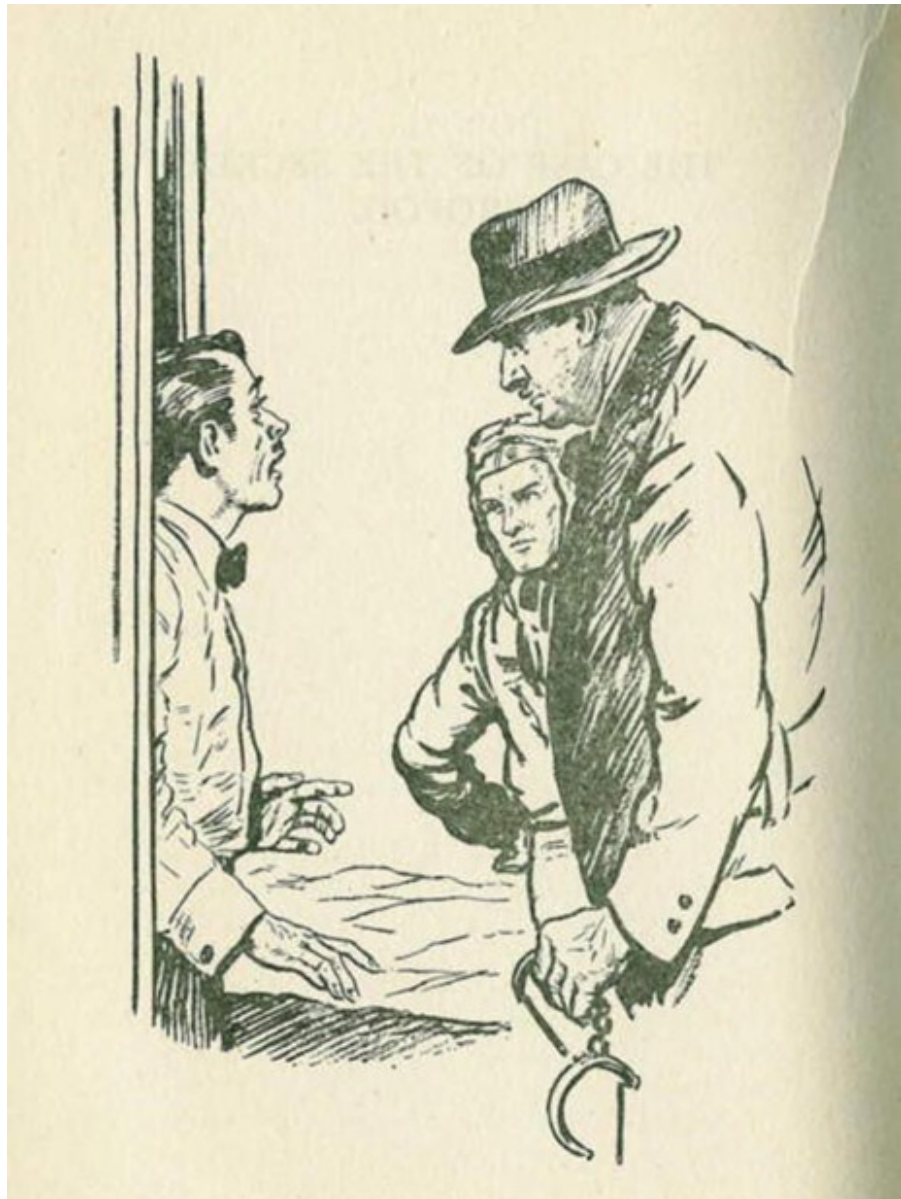
THE CASE OF THE SECRET

AEROFOIL

BIGGLES broke off in his conversation with Air Constable "Ginger"

Hebblethwaite as the door of his office at Air Police Operational Headquarters was opened abruptly and Air Commodore Raymond, chief of his Department, entered in a manner that might best be described as purposeful.

"Morning, sir," greeted Biggles, with the easy familiarity of long comradeship.



"Morning Bigglesworth," returned the Air Commodore briskly. "Sorry to barge in on you like this but I've just had a rather sticky business thrown at me. I'd like you to tidy it up, if you can. Matter of fact, Inspector Gaskin of C ' Department is already on the job, but he's just rung up to say that he could do with a little technical advice—if you were available."

"That's all right with me," agreed Biggles. "I like Gaskin. He won't

stand for any nonsense. What's the trouble ? "

"You've seen the morning papers ? " queried the Air Commodore, taking a chair that Ginger pulled out for him.

"Then you'll have read about this business of Flight Lieutenant Brand, a test pilot at the Experimental Establishment, being killed yesterday ? "

Biggles nodded. "A bad show."

"Worse than you may suppose," stated the Air Commodore gravely. "There's more to it than has been released for press publication."

Biggles reached for a scribbling pad. "Give me the gen," he requested.

The Air Commodore obliged. "When Brand was killed he was testing a new type of aerofoil—something quite new and a top secret. Actually, the device looked like solving a problem that has puzzled designers for years, the ideal compromise between fast and slow speeds ; or, if you like, an adjustable variation. That is to say, a machine to which it is fitted can be slowed down, without risk of stalling, almost to the speed of an helicopter. The thing is operated from the cockpit."

"To what machine had it been fitted for test purposes ? "

"A new light two-seater job called the Crane. The design is fairly orthodox except that the undercarriage consists of two legs attached to the main wing spars. This gives an exceptionally wide track, and so reduces the risk of the machine overturning should a wheel strike an obstruction on rough ground. Brand had tested the machine before, but after some modifications he was on what was to have been the final test when he was killed."

"What happened ? "

"We don't know, but it rather looks as if Brand had to make a forced landing—or was trying out a test landing in a field—but misjudged his distance and ran head on into some trees. No one saw the crash, but it was heard by two farm labourers working in the next field. They had just knocked off for lunch. That's how we know the time. The crash occurred precisely at one o'clock. The men ran to the spot and pulled the pilot clear. He was still alive but unconscious. One man ran for help. An ambulance took Brand to hospital where he died. He had several minor injuries, but the one that killed him was a fractured skull. The back of his head had taken a terrible .crack."

Biggles lit a cigarette thoughtfully. "Was he strapped in when the labourers got to him ? "

"No. They say he was half in and half out of the cockpit. He had evidently unfastened his safety belt."

"Did he recover consciousness before he died ? "

"Only for a moment. He made a remark, in a rambling sort of way, about a Persian—a new Persian. The doctor wasn't quite sure of the words, but he says that's what it sounded like."

"Does that make sense to anyone ? "

" No."

"Is that statement the reason why the Air Ministry got cracking on the case and called in the Yard ? "

"No. The reason was this. As I have told you, the crash occurred at one o'clock. Brand should have been back before that."

" Why ? "

"Because he took off at nine o'clock."

"Which means that he was in the air for four hours."

"Exactly. But he wasn't. He couldn't have been, because the Crane has a maximum fuel capacity of only three hours."

Biggles pursed his lips. "I see," he said slowly. "So he had been on the ground, somewhere, for an hour."

"Precisely. And that's what has put the Air Ministry in a flap—bearing in mind what Brand was doing. A lot of people would like a glimpse of that new aerofoil, which represents years of research. Naturally, we're afraid someone may have seen it."

"Had it been touched ? "

"Not as far as we know. It was still complete, but had, of course, been fractured in the collision. But that isn't to say that no one saw it . .

. or photographed it. When a new invention is stolen—well, we know the worst. But if an enemy agent can get hold of a secret without the fact being known an even more sinister situation arises, because it might then be put into production without our being aware of it. It might also be improved upon."

Biggles nodded. "It boils down to this. You want to know where Brand was, and what he was doing, for that lost hour of flying time

? "

"Exactly."

"And the only clue you have is this queer statement about a Persian ? "

"I'm afraid so."

" Is the crash still there ? "

"Yes. It was not to be touched until the Inspector of Accidents had seen it. Gaskin is there."

"All right, sir. I'll see what I can make of it," promised Biggles.

The Air Commodore got up. "Well, get cracking, because my phone won't stop ringing until I have something to report." He went off.

Ginger, looking at Biggles, spoke for the first time. "Where, may I ask, are you going to start looking for this Persian ? " he inquired.

"The man I'm going to look for," answered Biggles, "is the skunk who killed Brand."

Ginger's eyes opened wide. "But Brand was killed in the crash ! My guess is that he had engine trouble, and unfastened his safety belt intending to use his brolly ; then, seeing that he was too low, in trying to get down he hit the trees. The verdict will be, an error of judgement on the part of—"

"Forget it." Biggles stubbed his cigarette. "Brand was dead, or as near dead as makes no difference, when his machine hit the trees."

"How do you work that out ? "

"Well, to start with, a pilot of Brand's experience doesn't make such daft errors as the one you suggest. The evidence confirms that. When a vehicle collides head on with something the driver is flung forward, not back. I've seen a good many crashes in my time, and in practically every case it was the face of the pilot that took the crack, the result of his head striking the instrument panel. If Brand's crash had been genuine it would have been his forehead that took the shock."

"Then your theory is, the crash was faked ? Brand was, in fact, murdered

? "

"It looks that way to me."

"But in that case, if Brand was already unconscious at the time of the impact, what about the man who ran the machine into the trees ? "

"I'd say the machine first landed in the field. The murderer then pushed the throttle wide open and jumped clear. The aircraft, with Brand dying in his seat, would run into the trees. We can soon prove, or disprove, that."

" How ? "

"Because, if my theory is right, the throttle will still be open and the switch on. Had Brand been conscious, the last thing he would have done when he saw that a crash was inevitable, was switch off, to reduce the risk of fire."

"True enough," agreed Ginger.

"Let's take a Proctor and go down to have a look," said Biggles.

Twenty minutes later the police Proctor was circling over the scene of the tragedy. The grass field in which the pilot had apparently tried to land, the belt of trees and the crumpled remains of the Crane, were all in plain view. Beside the crash stood an R.A.F.

breakdown lorry. Some airmen were beginning to dismantle the wreck. The bowler-hatted figure of Inspector Gaskin was also conspicuous.

Biggles tilted his port wing for a better view. "Take a look," he told Ginger. "You can see the wide wheel track of the Crane distinctly from up here. It landed first alongside the far hedge—a nice straight run, you'll observe. Then it stopped, turned, and ran on again into the trees. Notice the swerve ? I've told you the reason. That machine was

no longer under control. Had Brand been conscious he wouldn't have swung like a pupil on his first solo. In fact, I don't see that he had any need to run into the trees at all, because there was plenty of room to lift the machine over them."

"I was just thinking the same thing," replied Ginger.

Biggles landed. Together they walked towards the crash. The Inspector came to meet them. "Glad to see you," he told Biggles. "This sort of thing isn't in my line. I can't make head nor tail of it."

"You will, in a minute," Biggles told him, and continued on to the wreck.

"All right boys, stand easy for a minute," he told the airmen. He made his way to the cockpit, took one glance and beckoned to Ginger. "There you are," he said. "Remember what I told you ?

The throttle is still open and the switch is on. I imagine she didn't catch fire because the tanks must have been nearly dry. That, I think, is as much as we shall learn here. All right, boys, carry on."

He took Inspector Gaskin to one side and in a few words gave him the facts, and his opinion of them. "Brand was murdered," he asserted. "We can guess how, and why.

What we have to find out now is where he was murdered, because there, with luck, we shall find the man who wanted details of the new aerofoil.

I suggest we go to Brand's station and see if his C.O. can help us. He should be able to tell us something about Brand, anyway, and his movements."

Inspector Gaskin nodded. "That argument makes sense to me," he agreed.

"I've got my car here."

"That's too slow," objected Biggles. We've got to move fast. I've a seat in my machine if you'd care for a lift ? "

"As long as you don't do anything like that with me," agreed the detective, without enthusiasm, jerking a thumb towards the crash.

"I'll do my best to keep you in one piece," promised Biggles, smiling.

A quarter of an hour later they were being shown into the office of Group-Captain Kidby, technical head of the Experimental Establishment under whom Brand served.

Biggles introduced himself and his companions, and explained why they were there.

The Group-Captain looked worried. "I can't see what all the fuss is about," he protested.

"The aerofoil is still okay."

"That's just what we want to confirm, sir," said Biggles. "There's a chance that it may not be altogether okay. You see, Brand was murdered, and there's reason to suppose that the aerofoil was the motive. May I ask you one or two questions ? "

"Certainly," agreed the Group-Captain, looking even more worried.

"Brand left the ground, I understand, at nine o'clock ? "

"There's no doubt about that. The Flight Officer logged him out."

"And he carried enough petrol for three hours' flying?" "Certainly not more."

"He knew about the new aerofoil ? I mean, he'd known about it for

some time ? "

"He knew all about it. He had advised the modifications."

"When was it arranged that he should do the test ? "

"The evening before, about six o'clock. The work had just been finished and he was anxious to try it out." "Did he leave the station after that ?

"

"Yes. He went out to dinner."

" Do you know where he went ? "

"He mentioned to me that he was dining with his fiancé and her brother."

"Oh. Then he was engaged ? "

" I believe so."

"Who's the lady ? "

"A Miss Buchner. A charming girl. Good looking, too. I've met her.

Several of my boys were crazy about her." The Group-Captain smiled wanly.

"Brand won the race, so to speak."

"You'd say he was in love with her ? "

"Very much so."

"You mentioned a brother ? "

"Yes. Stoma—that's the girl's name—kept house for him. They've a nice place about eight or nine miles from here, an old Georgian farmhouse called Overstone Manor, just this side of the village of Over- stone.

You're not suggesting"

"I'm not suggesting anything, sir," interposed Biggles. "I'm trying to muster any facts that might be useful. These people Buchner. The name doesn't sound English ? "

"I believe they're Hungarians—refugees, came over just before the war.

Having been here for so long they speak English fluently, of course."

"I see," said Biggles quietly. "Tell me, sir. You knew Brand well. Was he the sort of officer who might make an unofficial landing when he was on duty ? "

The Group-Captain hesitated. "That's a difficult question to answer," he replied slowly. "

That sort of thing is done sometimes, as you know as well as I do. In this case, though, there would have been no harm in it, because part of Brand's tests consisted of making difficult forced landings to try out in actual practice the slow speeds provided by the new aerofoil."

"Can you think of any place that Brand might have chosen for such experiments ? "

Again the Group-Captain hesitated. "There are plenty of places around here. He could please himself."

"Had he any other local friends ? "

"Not that I know of. His time was divided between his work and Miss Buchner."

"You haven't heard of a Persian coming to live in the parts ? "

The Group-Captain looked surprised. "A Persian ! Nothing like one."

"One last question. Do you happen to know if Miss Buchner, or her brother, can fly an aircraft ? "

"They've never mentioned it in my hearing, although I haven't seen much of the brother.

He's only here occasionally."

"Thank you, sir. I think that's about all," decided Biggles. "I won't take up any more of your time."

"If there's anything I can do, let me know," was the Group-Captain's parting remark.

"I think," said Biggles when they were outside, "our next port of call should be Overstone Manor."

"Are you expecting to find a Persian there ? " inquired Inspector Gaskin cynically.

You never know," replied Biggles seriously. "One thing I do know, now, is this. Brand was in love, and a man in love is liable to do things which, in sane moments, he would not do. If Brand more or less had permission to make forced landings I can think of nowhere more likely than the region of Overstone Manor. If he had time to spare surely it would be in the company of his ladylove. He wouldn't be the first pilot to make an airborne visit to his girl."

"Are you going to fly over ? " queried Ginger.

"I am, because in the first place I shall look for wheel tracks, which should be easier to pick up from

the air than from the ground. If there happens to be a field big enough to land in I may go down and have a word with Miss Buchner, or her brother."

They returned to the machine. Biggles studied his map for a moment before taking off.

Almost at once the village of Overstone came into view. Biggles headed towards it. "

That must be the Manor," he told Ginger who was sitting beside him, indicating a house that answered to the Group-Captain's description.

"There was no need for Brand to practise emergency landings there, anyhow," observed Ginger dryly. "That big pasture behind those trees at the back of the house is nearly big enough to put a Spitfire down."

"So I notice," murmured Biggles. "Watch for tracks." Cutting his engine he put the Proctor into a gentle glide.

"Can you see what I see ? " he asked presently.

"I can see wheel tracks, if that's what you mean," answered Ginger.

"They're rather faint, though, and I wouldn't swear they were made by the Crane."

"Look near the barn, by the trees. I fancy Brand used his brakes there. You can see the grooves plainly for a few yards."

"Yes, you're right," agreed Ginger.

"We'll go down," announced Biggles.

Without using the engine he made an S turn and landed, finishing his run near the barn to which he had called attention.

As they got out, a cat, which had apparently been inside appeared, mewling and flicking its tail in the manner of such animals. For a moment or two no one paid any attention to it. Then Biggles stopped suddenly, his hand on Gaskin's arm. "Look !" he said tersely.

"Look at what ? " inquired the detective.

"That cat." "What about it ? "

"Do you remember Brand's last words ? "

"You mean, about a Persian—a new Persian ? "

"What Brand said, or tried to say, was a Blue Persian," said Biggles in a tense voice. "

That cat's a Blue Persian."

Silence fell. The cat continued to walk round in circles. When Biggles spoke again his voice was hard. "I'd say that cat was the last thing Brand saw as he was struck down from behind. In his brief moment of semi-consciousness before he died the memory of that cat still lingered. To him it was a warning signal and he tried to pass the information on."

Inspector Gaskin's lips came together in a hard line. "That's it," he said grimly. "This is where Brand took the crack. I'm going up to have a word with the folks at the house.

Keep quiet. We may see something before they see us."

"Go ahead," invited Biggles. "You'd better take over from here."

With the Inspector leading, taking such cover as was available, they walked on to the house, which could be seen through the trees. Not a sound came from it, except the twittering of sparrows on the eaves.

"I'm afraid we're too late," murmured Ginger anxiously, as, keeping in the bushes that flanked the drive, they drew near the front door.

His fears were nearly justified ; but there is a world of difference between 'too late,' and '

nearly too late.' While they stood in the bushes discussing the best method of entering the house, the front door was opened, and a dark, smartly-dressed young woman, good looking in a bold sort of way, came out. That she was going somewhere on a definite errand was at once apparent from her businesslike manner, and the fact that she wore a hat and gloves. And it seemed probable from a small packet that she carried in her hand that her business was with the post office.

In the light of what followed it may be supposed that, taken by surprise, she lost her head and behaved in a manner which Gaskin, at any rate, took to be suspicious. There was nothing in the least threatening or offensive in his manner as, with the others behind him, he stepped out from the bushes, and raising his hat, said quietly : "I'm Inspector Gaskin from Scotland Yard. Assuming that you are Miss Buchner I'd like to have a talk with you."

At his first words the girl gasped. The colour drained from her face.

Even more significant was the way she tried to run back to the house, at the same time holding the packet she carried against her blouse. But the detective was too quick for her. His hand closed over her wrist. "There's no need to run away, miss," he said quietly but firmly. "I think I'd like to see what it is you're so anxious to hide." He took the packet without difficulty, for, indeed, the girl seemed on the point of fainting.

"Addressed to somebody in Switzerland," observed the detective, glancing at the small parcel. He handed it to Biggles. "You might have a look at that. It may be what we're looking for."

Biggles tore the package open. From an inner envelope he took a collection of micro-films. One glance at them was enough. "Quite right,"

he said. " This is it."

" Ah ! In that case we'll see if the gentleman is at home," said the Inspector calmly.

He went to the front door and rang the bell.

It was opened by a foreign looking man in his shirt sleeves.

"Mr. Buchner ? " inquired the Inspector.

Yes ? "

Before the man could have grasped the situation his wrists were in handcuffs.

"What—what's the meaning of this ? " stammered the man in an agitated voice.

"I'm Inspector Gaskin from Scotland Yard and I arrest you for the murder of Flight Lieutenant Brand, an officer of the Royal Air Force, on these premises, yesterday forenoon," was the curt reply. It's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. Come along, sir."

Thus ended, as far as Biggles was concerned, the Affair of the Secret Aerofoil. It only remains to be said that evidence found in Overstone

Manor revealed the Buchners to have been enemy agents. They were not, it turned out, brother and sister, but man and wife, and their purpose was to obtain information about anything new at the Experimental Establishment, for which reason the woman had encouraged the attentions of officers on the nearby station. What actually happened on the fatal morning was never known, but a reasonable supposition is that Brand had been invited to call, and the woman had entertained him in the house while her " brother " took photographs of the new aerofoil. Brand may have returned to his machine unexpectedly and caught him in the act, and in the altercation which would naturally follow had been clubbed from behind. As cats have a habit of standing against the feet of people they know he may have stumbled, or fallen over it. Buchner, whose flying licence was found in the house, revealing that he was a pilot, had then finished his photographs and disposed of Brand's body, and the machine, by faking an accident. The Crown Prosecutor proved a charge of wilful murder against Buchner, who in due course paid the penalty demanded by the law.

Brand's faithless sweetheart was sentenced, as an accessory, to a long term of imprisonment.

THE CASE OF THE MYSTERIOUS

GUNSHOTS

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND finished his monthly inspection of the Air Police equipment and returned with Biggles to the Operations Room, followed by the pilots of the Department.

"Well, you seem to have everything on the top line ; all you need now is something to do,

" remarked the Air Commodore jokingly, as he accepted a cigarette from Biggles' case and sat down on a chair that Ginger pulled out for him.

"You find us something to do and we'll do it," replied Biggles lightly.

How would you like to run out to Africa ? " suggested the Air Commodore.

Biggles threw him a sidelong glance. "I had a feeling you were holding something up your sleeve. What's happened in Africa, and in what particular area? Africa, as I remember it, is a biggish sort of place."

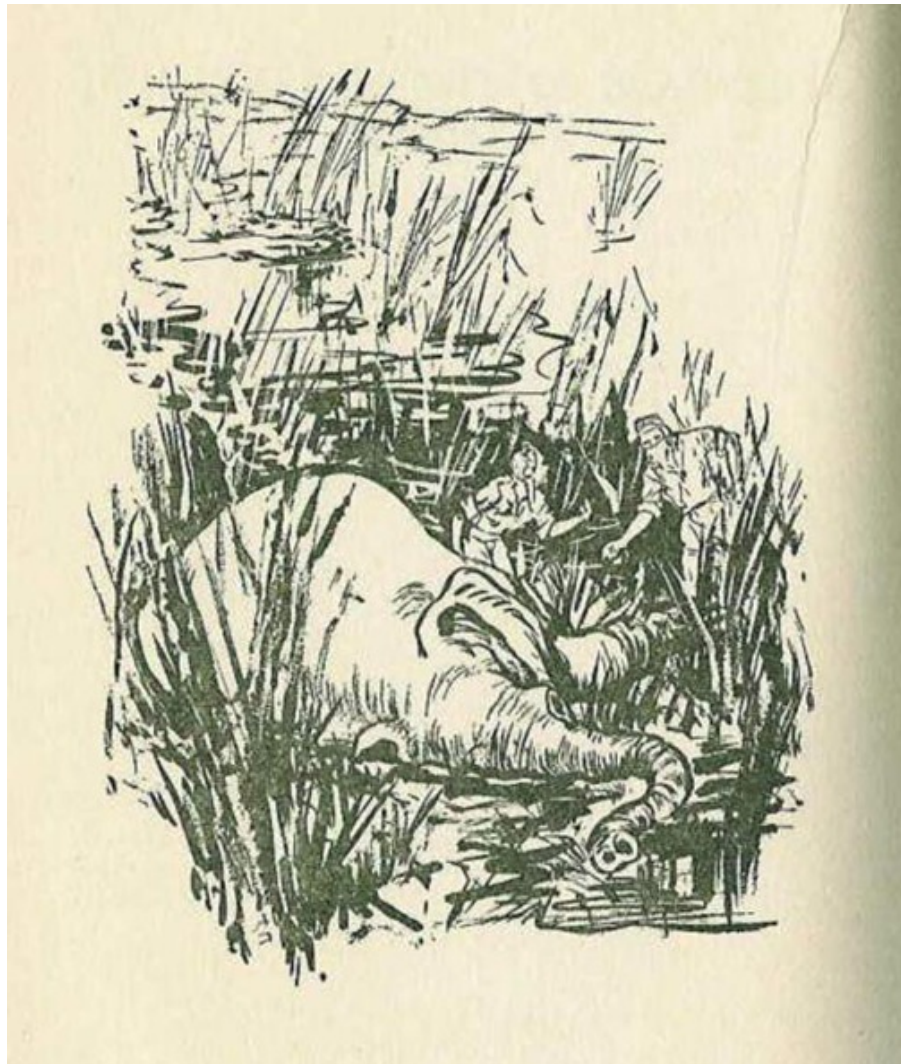
"One question at a time," requested the Air Commodore. "And you needn't refer to the matter in the past tense. Apparently it isn't only what has happened, but what is still happening. Frankly, I might as well say at once that I don't think it's anything very exciting, or even urgent ; but if you've nothing better to do you might as well have a look at the thing. There's been a complaint from the Colonial Office. If I do nothing about it, and it did turn out to be something serious, the public, quite rightly, would start asking what we were doing."

"What's happened—so far ? " queried Biggles. "Apparently the thing began a couple of months

ago—that is, as far as we know. Of course, it might have been going on for a long time without us knowing anything about it. Anyhow, a couple of months ago a native of the Karuli tribe walked into the hospital at Khartoum with an arm in such a state that even the doctors were nearly sick. It had been shattered by a bullet and had turned septic. The arm was amputated. Asked how he had come by such a wound the man complained that he had been shot at from an aeroplane, for no reason at all. He and some of his friends were out hunting when an aeroplane appeared and sprayed them with machine-gun bullets."

"Where did this happen ? " asked Biggles.

"In the Southern Soudan—on the fringe of the Sudd. You'll have seen the Sudd, I imagine ? "



"Anyone who has flown over the main trunk route from Cairo to the Cape can hardly have missed seeing it," answered Biggles dryly.

"I don't know much about it myself," admitted the Air Commodore.

"You haven't missed much," Biggles told him. "The Sudd is really the basin of the White Nile. It stretches from Khartoum to Malakal—that's about four hundred miles. Exactly how wide it is I don't know because I've never flown across it, only down it ; and that was as -much as I wanted to see. But there can't be less than ten thousand square miles of it. It's all one vast swamp— bog, weed, mud, rushes and matted

vegetation. But go on about this native."

"That's all, except that according to him this daft pilot was amusing himself by shooting bullets at all and sundry. He made one significant remark. He said it was the first time he had seen the plane, but he had on previous occasions heard shooting in the distance. To be quite honest, the authorities paid little attention to the tale. The Sudan Administration asked the R.A.F. Station Commander at Khartoum to request his pilots to be a little more careful about where they were shooting.

The Station Commander promptly denied responsibility, stating that none of his pilots had been anywhere near the place ; there was nothing to shoot at anyway ; and in any case they did not carry ammunition, much less waste it, in peace time."

"Seems queer," murmured Biggles. "Somehow I can't see a native making up a tale like that."

"Quite right," agreed the Air Commodore. "Later developments suggest that the tale was true. The next incident nearly had more serious consequences. Shortly afterwards, Captain Stonehouse, of the Sudan Police, was approached by a number of natives in a very hostile frame of mind. For a few minutes things looked ugly. And this was all the more surprising because this particular tribe had never given any trouble.

However, Stonehouse managed to get them quiet, whereupon they explained their grievance. They had, they said, been shot at for no reason at all.

They were looking for some lost cattle in the Sudd when an aeroplane came along and sprayed them with bullets. I should make it clear that these men had no connection with the Karuli tribe, to which the man with the shattered arm belonged. Their villages are at least a hundred miles apart."

Which makes the confirmation of the first story all the more impressive,"

put in Biggles.

"Quite so. Well, the upshot was, really to satisfy the natives Stonehouse hung about for a week or so in the hope of spotting this alleged aircraft. He didn't see it, but twice he heard the sound of distant shooting—machine-gun fire, at that. On one occasion he thought he heard the drone of an aero engine."

"So however daft it may seem, there is no longer any room for doubt," murmured Biggles thoughtfully. "Someone, with an aircraft, is firing a machine gun in the Sudd."

"That, I think, has now been established," asserted the Air Commodore.

"Now tell me this. What possible reason could a man have for flying up and down a place like the Sudd, expending ammunition that is today quite expensive ? And why pick on harmless natives for a target ? "

"He didn't pick on natives for a target," said Biggles firmly.

"But he did ! "

"I say he didn't—unless we're dealing with a lunatic. I'd say he was shooting at something else and the natives just happened to be in the line of fire."

"Then what was he shooting at ? What is there to shoot at in the Sudd ? "

"To the best of my knowledge, the only living things in the Sudd, apart from an occasional party of natives who know what few tracks there are, are hippos, crocodiles, an occasional buffalo, several elephants and a great number of waterfowl of all sorts.

Where does this Karuli tribe hang out ? "

"West of the Sudd and at the northern end." "And these natives who cut up rough with Stone-house ? "

"Their territory is to the south-west."

"Khartoum lies at the northern end ; Malakal at the southern end ; so it looks as if our crazy pilot must have his headquarters somewhere on the east side, or Stonehouse would have seen something of him."

The Air Commodore stubbed his cigarette. "Well, what do you make of it ?

"

Biggles smiled faintly. "With so little to work on, what can one make of it ? "

The Air Commodore considered him critically. "All the same, you've got an idea, haven'

t you ? "

Biggles nodded. "Of course. That's what I'm paid for. After all the flying I've done you'd expect me to know something about the things that decorate the landscape underneath me."

"Well, what is it ? "

"I'll tell you when I've checked up."

"What gave you the idea ? "

"An old friend—my memory. To be more precise a photograph I once saw. It was taken by a fellow who made one of the first flights down Africa. He flew over the Sudd—in fact, he was probably the first man to see the place from the air."

"How are you going to check up ? "

"By flying out and having a look round. But before I go there's one thing I'd like you to do for me. A pilot has to have fuel before he starts off across the Sudd. He needs quite a lot of petrol if he's going to stay there. I'd like you to ask the Air Ministry just how many machines have force-landed, or disappeared, in the Sudd, after refuelling at Khartoum or Malakal. I mean, recently. There haven't been many, I think."

"I've already done that," answered the Air Commodore.

" Ah ! So you tried to do the job without telling me anything about it," accused Biggles reproachfully.

"No. It merely struck me that a machine might be down in the Sudd, and shooting off its ammunition to reveal its position to a possible rescue party."

Biggles looked pained.

I don't think that's the

answer. The shooting has been going on for a long time, and over a wide area."

"Yes, that's true," admitted the Air Commodore. "What machines if any, did the Ministry say had been lost in the Sudd area ? "

"Only two. The first was an air liner of the Nestorian class, on the regular run to the Cape. It had to make a forced landing in the Sudd and stuck in the mud. The passengers were rescued by canoes. It was impossible to get the machine off again so it's still there."

"You're sure of that ? "

"Yes. Apparently it's often mentioned by pilots in their reports."

"And the other machine ? "

"Something quite different—a Storch."

"German, eh ? How did that get there ? "

"It did very much the same thing as the Nestorian. About eighteen months ago two German pilots, named Brund and Heckel, did a reliability test run from Hamburg to the Cape. It wasn't successful, and the flight broke down somewhere near Kimberley. Early this year they tried again. They refuelled at Khartoum and took off for Malakal. They didn't arrive, and nothing has been seen of them since. There was a search but it was fruitless. They must both be dead."

"One would think so," admitted Biggles. "Still, in this flying game one never knows. Just to make sure I'll slip along and look over the ground myself."

All right. Then I'll leave the case with you," said the Air Commodore, getting up. "I shall be at the Yard if you want me. Good-bye for now."

The pilots stood as the Air Commodore went out.

No sooner had the door closed on the Air Commodore than Ginger pointed an accusing finger at Biggles. "You're holding out on us," he challenged.

"What about this photo you mentioned ? What was on it ? "

"I think I have a copy of it here," answered Biggles. "Just a minute." He went over to a filing cabinet and presently returned with a manila jacket tied with tape and labelled '

Africa ', Opening it he searched for a little while, and then, with an exclamation of satisfaction, withdrew a large photograph. "Here we

are !

In my opinion that's one of the most remarkable air photos ever taken,"

he said, as he laid the picture on his desk.

There was silence for a moment while the others looked at it. Then Bertie said : "By Jove

! I see what you mean, old boy. It certainly is a topper. I didn't know there were so many elephants in the world."

Ginger, with understanding in his eyes, was gazing at the photograph. It was an aerial shot, taken with an oblique camera from perhaps five hundred feet, of such a herd of elephants as he did not know existed anywhere, even in Africa. He tried to count them, but found it almost impossible. There were hundreds, some of them majestic tuskers.

"The chap who took that photo was probably the first man to see that herd," remarked Biggles. " It caused a bit of a sensation when it was published because no one had any idea that such a herd existed. The experts said what had happened was this. By the latter half of the nineteenth century elephants were being so persecuted by ivory hunters that they withdrew into one of the few natural sanctuaries that remained in Africa—the Sudd.

There, not even the hunters could follow them, so they were able to settle down and multiply in peace. No doubt quite a lot of people realised that here was a fortune in ivory waiting to be picked up—if there was any way of getting to it. One man at least realised that there might be one way. He bought an aircraft, engaged a pilot, and was all ready for an air expedition when the authorities stepped in and stopped him."

"Quite right ! " burst out Bertie. "Only an absolute bounder would think of shooting grand beasts like that from the air."

"Where money is concerned some people have no conscience, I'm afraid,"

said Biggles sadly. "You're

quite right, Bertie. So were the authorities when they said no. The Sudd was the last big natural game reserve left and they were determined to keep it that way."

"And you think someone has sneaked out in an aircraft and is now machine-gunning the poor brutes ? " questioned Algy.

"I can think of nothing else likely to attract anyone to the Sudd," answered Biggles. "

When the Air Commodore told his story the first thing I asked myself was, what financial reward was there to be found in the Sudd ? On the face of it there was nothing.

Then I remembered this photograph and the answer seemed to be ivory. I may be wrong, but I have a suspicion that those two German pilots are still alive. They may not have seen the photo, but they might well have spotted the herd on their first flight which ended at Kimberley. If so, the temptation to pick up some easy money might have been too much for them. They returned home, and came back properly equipped for the job.

They had an excuse ready. They were trying to do what they had failed to do the first time—

establish the reputation of their machine. Actually, to me that sounds suspicious in itself, because I need hardly tell you that if once a machine is suspected of being unreliable it's hardly worth while trying to restore confidence in it. A Storch would certainly be an ideal type for the job. The Nazis, you remember, produced the prototype during the War, when they were looking for something ultra-light, and slow, for spotting and communication duties in difficult country. But this is all guesswork. Let's waffle out to Africa and see how it fits into the facts.

We'll take the two Proctors, starting tomorrow morning."

Biggles' suspicions received some confirmation earlier than he expected.

A week later, at Khartoum, while the Proctors were being refuelled, the pilots were invited to lunch by the officer commanding the R.A.F.

station. During the meal, quite naturally, Biggles discussed with the wing-commander the object of his trip, in the hope that he might learn something, the station being no great distance from the locality of the trouble. One of the questions he asked was, had anything been seen recently of the Nestorian that had been abandoned in the Sudd ?

"It's funny you should ask that because one of my pilots flew over it the other day,"

answered the wing-commander. "It's still there, although there's nothing queer about that, of course. The wreck has become almost a landmark. But the officer concerned, who had seen the machine several times, made a note in his report that something had changed.

Flying low, he came to the conclusion that someone had been to the spot because a considerable area of ground had been beaten flat, almost as if a runway had been stamped through the rushes."

"But would that be possible ? I understood that the machine was stuck in mud," put in Biggles.

"So it is for ten months of the year," agreed the wing-commander. "But for a short time at the height of the dry season much of the Sudd dries out, and then the ground becomes fairly firm. I wouldn't care to land on it myself, mind you, although it has been done. A light plane in the hands of a good pilot would be able to land in quite a number of places.

As a matter of detail, the summer season is rather a nuisance to us here, because the rushes get very dry and the natives, either deliberately or by accident, often set fire to them. The result is a haze of smoke that spoils visibility."

"What are conditions like now ? " asked Biggles. "I mean, for a landing."

"As good as they could be. It's been an extremely dry year, for which reason, no doubt, a lot of activity has recently been noted."

Biggles looked up sharply. "What sort of activity ? "

"Only native, of course. Occasionally we do a reconnaissance over the area, and once or twice lately my fellows have noticed a fairly considerable party of natives deep in the Sudd where normally they couldn't get. I imagine they are after game, which the water attracts."

The wing-commander dropped his voice. "It's nothing to do with me, but I have an idea these natives are having a go at the elephant. Something seems to have disturbed the herd, anyway. Usually the beasts keep together, but lately they seem to have become scattered."

"That's very interesting," said Biggles slowly. "Where exactly was this native activity concentrated ? "

"Over on the east side. Occasionally we send a machine there to have a look at things along the Abyssinian frontier."

"I think I'll take a run that way myself," decided Biggles. "If you'll excuse me I'll get off right away, to put in as much time as possible while the present conditions last."

"They won't last much longer. The rains are about due," stated the wing-commander. "If you'll come along to the map room I'll show you exactly where the crash lies. I have some photographs of it too."

"Thank you, sir," acknowledged Biggles. "I'd like very much to have a look at them."

Within two hours he was in fact looking at the actual crash, which stood on even keel, gliding in a wide spiral round it, finishing at a height of only a few feet above it. What the wing-commander had said

about someone having visited the spot was obviously true.

"If that isn't a runway through those dry rushes I'll eat my goggles," he told Ginger, who was also gazing down with a good deal of interest. "I'm going down to have a look at this," he declared. "Tell Algy to stand by in case we hit a snag."

Ginger passed on the information to the second machine, which was flying on their tail, while Biggles made another circuit and then glided in along the broad track where the rushes had been flattened.

Apart from the landing being a trifle bumpy it was accomplished without mishap, and the Proctor ran to a stop within twenty yards of the derelict Nestorian—a big, twin-engined biplane. A minute or two later they were on their feet examining the wreck, which had stood up to exposure better than might have been supposed. But two features were significant. The first was the instrument panel. It had been carefully stripped, obviously by some person who knew how to do it.

"No native did that," asserted Biggles. "Those instruments were worth money and someone knew it. All the same, I doubt if anyone would risk a landing here for the express purpose of salvaging them. I'd say he had something else in mind—petrol, for instance. Remember, when this machine came down it had just left Khartoum, where its tanks would be topped up.

That means that it was carrying a heavy load of fuel. There would be a certain amount of evaporation, but not so much, I think, as has actually happened. One tank still has a lot left in it, although the others are nearly dry. Why should there be any difference ? Evaporation would apply equally to all. It looks to me as if someone has been using this place as a refuelling station. That would account for the runway. To anyone in need of petrol this must have been a godsend—particularly if that person didn't want to be seen too often at a proper airfield, where questions might be asked. I have an idea, too, that the fellow who has been landing here didn't tumble on the

Nestorian by accident, either. He knew it was here."

"Those two German pilots, having once flown over the Sudd, would be

pretty sure to know about it," opined Ginger.

"You took the words out of my mouth," murmured Biggles. "Anyway, I think it's safe to say that the mystery machine, I mean the one that has been spraying the landscape with bullets, has been getting its petrol here. It would have to get petrol from somewhere, and if those Storch pilots had shown up at any place where petrol is normally available they would have been recognised. I fancy we're on a warm scent. Now we'll go and see if we can make it warmer." Biggles started off through dry rushes that came nearly to his shoulders. "Watch your step for snakes," he warned.

"Where are you going ? " asked Ginger, in a surprised voice.

"I spotted something from the air and I want to have a look at it," replied Biggles. "It isn't far away—, half a mile, not more."

Ginger, striking at mosquitoes that rose at every step, followed, and ten minutes later, with his handkerchief over his nose, stood looking at the object of the walk. It was the carcass of an elephant, a magnificent bull. Yet it carried no tusks, and the reason was evident. They had been hacked out.

" Well, there it is," said Biggles simply. " That's the answer. Ivory.

All we have to do now is find the poachers. We shall have to be careful.

Those tusks weren't carved out by white men. They've got natives working for them. Only natives could hack out an elephant's tusks like that. They didn't come from the western side, obviously, because those are the lads who made the complaints. We'll try the east. I noticed tracks leading that way. No wonder the wing-commander said there had been a lot of activity lately.

Tusks are heavy things to haul about. I'd wager that poor old fellow's tusks weighed seventy or eighty pounds apiece. They'd be too big to get in a light plane, and too cumbersome. Hence the native porters. The poor beasts are shot from the air, plastered with machine-gun bullets, apparently. What a sickening business ! The natives follow up

and collect the ivory. We shouldn't find it too difficult to track them to where they're taking it. Men with heavy loads couldn't move through this stuff without leaving a trail.

Judging from the number of trails I noticed there must be quite a dump of ivory somewhere. I also noticed several carcasses."

"So that's what they were," cried Ginger. "I noticed several black things lying about but couldn't make out what they were."

"That's because I was looking for dead elephants, and you weren't,"

returned Biggles evenly. "All right, we'll follow these trails and see if we can find out where they end.

When we get in the air tell Algy to carry on behind us."

Soon afterwards the Proctor was in the air again, heading eastwards, following a trail which became ever more conspicuous as it was joined by others, all running in, Ginger noticed, from the carcasses of slaughtered animals. The effect was that of a main line, in frequent use, served by small feeder lines.

"I don't think these butchers can be very bright or they wouldn't have allowed their bearers to go on using the same tracks," remarked Ginger.

"Perhaps they had no say in the matter," returned Biggles. "After all, the fellows carrying the tusks would choose a well-beaten track rather than make a new one every time. Moreover, in crossing the swamp, the way wouldn't always be a matter of choice. They'd have to keep on the hard ground, and much of it still looks pretty soft."

Nothing more was said for some time. The Proctor, which Biggles had taken up to a thousand feet, droned on, with the reserve machine cruising at a comfortable distance behind. For the most part, Ginger watched the trail, which still ran on and on, often making a wide detour round stagnant water. Elephants were sometimes seen, always in small groups that stampeded as the aircraft approached. Which, as

Biggles remarked grimly, was a clear indication of the manner in which they had been harassed.

Normally, wild animals soon learn that they have nothing to fear from aircraft.

The eastern extremity of the great swamp came into sight. It was marked by an irregular line of rising ground topped by typical East African scrub and flat-topped trees. Into such an area, split by a conspicuous gorge, the well-beaten trail that the aircraft had been following eventually disappeared.

"That, I should say, is the terminus," observed Biggles. "If the ivory isn't already on its way to the coast that's where we shall find it."

"Are you going to land ? " asked Ginger.

" I am."

"The poachers, whoever they are, may show fight."

"So what? That's a chance every policeman on the trail of a crook has to take," asserted Biggles. "I'm not letting them get away with their loot if I can prevent it. Knowing that the rains are near they may pull out any day now."

"What about the natives ? They may turn nasty if these fellows are paying them well."

"I should say it's more likely that they are just giving them elephant meat in return for their services," said Biggles. "Still, it's always better to avoid trouble if it's possible."

Make a signal to Khartoum ; tell them what's happened, give them the pin-point and say we're going down. Then, if anything goes wrong, they will at least be able to follow up.

If the ivory is here someone will have to fetch it, anyhow. We can't carry it. I'll cruise a bit to the north while you send the signal."

"The poachers may hear us."

"They've probably heard machines before. They'll assume we're just a routine flight from Khartoum. Tell Algy to follow me down when I land.

Get cracking."

"Okay." Ginger turned to the transmitter.

Twenty minutes later, having made a long cast to the north, Biggles turned back and glided towards an area of flat, open country, about a mile from the gorge into which the trail disappeared. After a careful survey of the ground for possible obstructions, he landed, switched off, got out and waited for the other machine to come in.

Algy landed, taxied up and switched off. He and Bertie got out.

Biggles explained the position to them. "I'm expecting to find the Storch parked near the gorge," he said. "If it isn't there—well, the poachers, whoever they are, won't be far away. My plan is to walk along quietly and if possible take them by surprise. That may save trouble all round. If they decide to fight, then it'll have to be that way. Bertie, you'll stay here and take care of the machines, just in case someone comes along with the idea of borrowing one of them. I should hate to have to walk home."

"Absolutely, old boy, absolutely," agreed Bertie.

"All right, let's go." Biggles turned away and set off at a brisk pace.

An uncomfortable walk of about a quarter of an

hour—for the heat was oppressive and the flies tiresome —brought them near the belt of timber through the middle of which ran the

gorge. That someone was in it was now evident, for from the place where the ravine debouched into the open plain a thin spiral of blue smoke rose into the air.

"No more talking," ordered Biggles softly. "Move as quietly as you can."

He went on, more slowly now, keeping in the deep shadow along the fringe of the timber. Once, from somewhere not far ahead, came a confused murmur of voices. Biggles altered direction towards the spot. A few more paces and he stopped, pointing.

Catching up, Ginger looked in the direction indicated and saw something that caused him no surprise. It was an aeroplane. He recognised the type.

It was a Storch. It stood well back in the deep shade of a big tree with its nose pointing to open ground that had been cleared to make the short runway necessary for a take-off. The trunk of the tree next attracted his attention. It appeared to be exceptionally thick, almost white in colour, and curiously fluted. He stared at it for some seconds before he perceived that he was not looking at the trunk of the tree at all, but at a number of long white objects that had been stacked against it. He had never seen raw ivory but he was never in doubt as to what the white objects were. Elephant tusks.

Biggles beckoned him nearer. "Turn on the draining tap of the main tank,"

he whispered, pointing to the aircraft. "It's likely they'll try to get away in it so we may as well immobilise them. I'll keep watch."

Not a sound broke the sultry silence as Ginger obeyed the order. In five minutes he was back. "Okay," he breathed.

Biggles walked on, and did not stop again until dappled sunlight revealed a small glade just ahead.

In the middle of it had been pitched a tent. In front, on logs that had evidently been placed there to serve as seats, sat three white men. Two were young and clean-shaven, dressed in well-worn tropical drill

suits.

The third man was a good deal older ; burly of figure and heavily bearded, he was dressed in the manner of a hunter. A bandolier hung across his chest and a rifle rested on his knees.

Biggles walked straight up to them, and was speaking before they had recovered from the shock of his sudden appearance. "I'm a policeman, and you're under arrest for poaching ivory in a prohibited area," he announced curtly.

The effect of this was not in the least what Ginger expected it would be.

The old man, looking at his companions, merely said in a deep, sonorous voice, with a slight foreign accent : "So. I told you trouble would come of this."

Biggles looked at the speaker. "Who are you ? " he asked.

"Paul Loezer is my name," was the answer, made quite calmly.

"Your nationality ? "

"I am an Afrikander."

"How do you come into this ? "

"I am a trader for many years in East Africa. These boys tell me they have found much ivory and ask if I will buy it, or take it to the coast.

When I see what it is I will not touch it. I tell them this. Now I am glad, because in all my time, I do not break the law."

"Have you your wagons here ? "

"They are nearby."

"Where do you live ? "

"At Mogada."

"Will you accept a commission from me to take this ivory there and hold it until the Government decides

what to do with it ? I'll give you the order in writing." "Very well."

Biggles looked at the younger men. "You're Brund and Heckel I believe ? "

The two men looked at each other but did not speak. "I'm going to take you to Khartoum,

" went on Biggles. "Will you come quietly, or "

He got no further, for at this juncture the two men, as if actuated by a secret signal, moved swiftly, although their actions were different. One sprang to his feet, and raced, swerving, to the trees, into which he disappeared from sight. The other snatched the rifle from the trader's knees and pointed the muzzle at Biggles. Biggles jumped sideways, his automatic now in his hand ; but as it happened he did not have to use it, for the firing-pin of the rifle snapped home on an empty breach. With a bitter curse the German flung the rifle at Biggles and jumped back into the tent, to reappear a moment later from the far end, dodging and twisting as he followed his companion into the trees. Biggles half-raised his pistol but lowered it again. "I don't think they can get far," he said. "Go after them, but be careful." Turning to the old man, who was shaking his head sorrowfully at these events, he asked : "What natives are there here ? "

" Murloos. They're good boys. I know them. They do not understand this poaching. They are in their own camp over there." The old man pointed.

"I'll leave you to explain things to them," said Biggles quickly. "Get the

ivory home.

You'll hear more about it later." And with that he turned and ran in the direction from which now came the crack of pistol shots.

Before he could reach the spot all other sounds were drowned in the roar of the Storch's motor. "Stop them ! " he yelled. "Tell them they've only got their gravity tank. They'll—"

The rest of his words were lost in the rising crescendo of the engine as the throttle was opened and the machine took off. He arrived on the scene just as Algy and Ginger came running up.

"We couldn't stop them without exposing ourselves, or shooting them," explained Algy. "

They both had automatics and held us off while they started up."

"No matter, they can't get far," returned Biggles, and with the others following hurried to the edge of the trees, eyes on the Storch, now racing low over the dry rushes.

What's going to happen when they switch from gravity to the main tank ? "

asked Algy anxiously.

"Only one thing can happen, unless they grab some altitude first," answered Biggles quietly.

And at that moment it happened. The Storch's engine cut out dead. For perhaps half a minute the machine glided on, losing speed ; then it swerved a little, as if the pilot had seen some open ground and was trying to reach it. In this he failed, and apparently realising what had

happened, switched back to his gravity tank. He was too late. The machine stalled. The undercarriage caught in the rushes and the inevitable result was a somersault.

With one accord the watchers raced to the spot, but long before they got to it Ginger saw that it was hopeless. Not only was the machine on fire, but a considerable area of rushes around it was blazing furiously. The flames spread rapidly, and a great cloud of smoke billowed upwards.

Biggles stopped. "We'd better get out of this ourselves," he said, with a twinge of anxiety in his voice. "That fire is travelling fast, and it's moving towards the place where we parked our machines. There's nothing more we can do here anyway. We might as well go home."

THE HARE AND THE TORTOISE

A STORY OF THE WAR

SQUADRON LEADER BIGGLESWORTH landed on his home

airfield at Rowlham, in Kent, and taxied slowly to the camouflaged canvas shed that was the squadron's workshop. On reaching it he switched off and sat for a moment contemplating several neat round holes on the right hand side of his cockpit, trying to work out the angle from which the bullets had been fired and how they had missed him.

Then, with a slight shrug, he jumped to the ground.

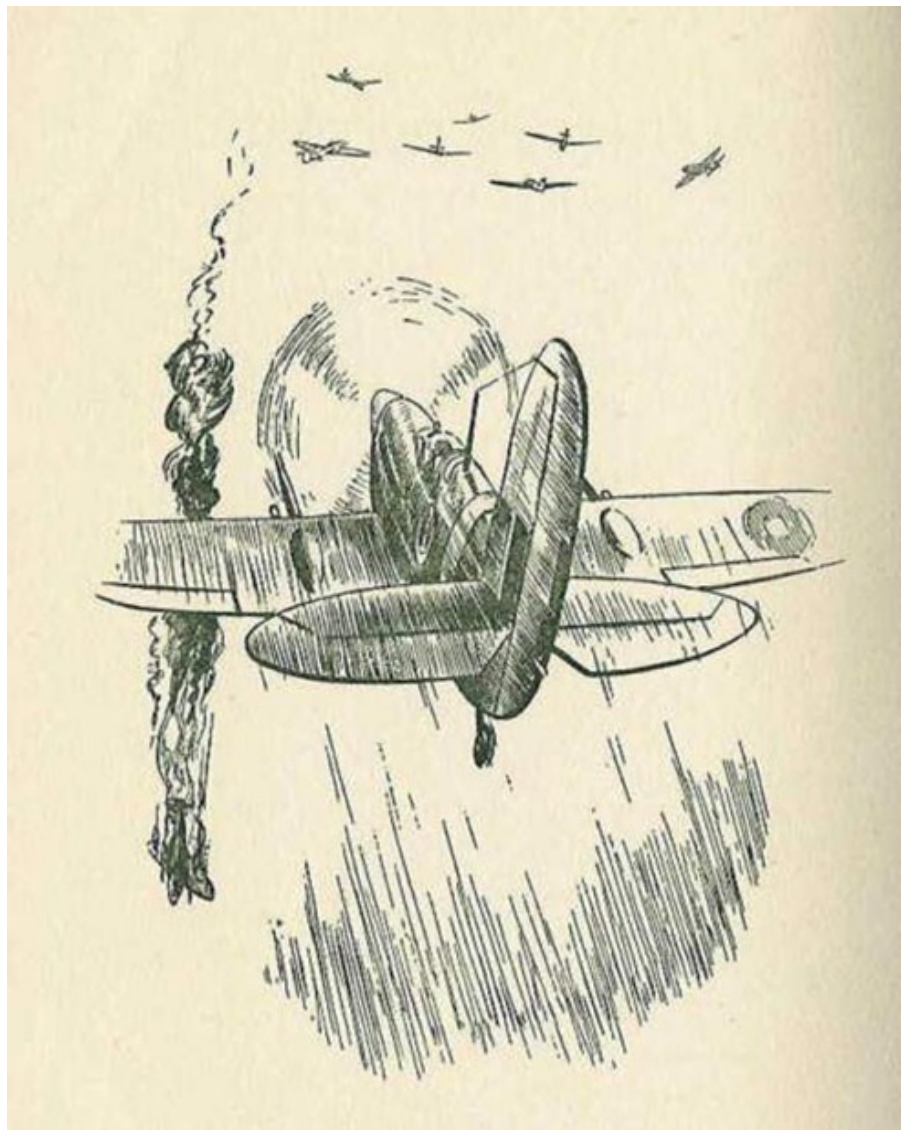
"Everything all right, sir ? " asked Flight-Sergeant Smyth, who was waiting.

"Yes, she's flying nicely," answered Biggles. "Are there any other machines out ? "

"No, sir. Everyone's home. I think most of the officers have gone to Tonbridge. I saw the tender go off about half an hour ago."

Biggles nodded, and strolled thoughtfully towards the officers' mess.

As he neared it a puzzled expression crept over his face, for someone was playing the piano ; but not as it was usually played. Instead of the customary jangle of jazz, the quiet harmony of a Chopin nocturne drifted through the open window into the still evening air.



Having parked his flying kit in the hall Biggles opened the door of the

ante-room. There was only one occupant, a stranger, who apparently had not seen him enter. He sat at the piano, a slight, pale youth, with fair hair. On his finely cut features there was an expression of inspiration as his fingers wandered over the keyboard. Suddenly, as if attracted by the

personality of the man watching him, he turned sharply, and seeing that he was observed, stopped playing.

"I'm sorry, sir," he stammered.

"What about ? " Biggles raised his eyebrows. "Go on playing," he invited.

"It's a change to hear real music." He dropped into a chair by an open window.

"Are you Squadron Leader Bigglesworth by any chance ? " asked the pianist.

"I am," confirmed Biggles.

" Ah ! The others told me you were out, sir, but would soon be back. So I waited. If it isn'

t a rude question to ask, did you get a Messerschmitt ? "

Biggles smiled faintly. "No. But one nearly got me. By the way, what are you doing here

? "

"My name's Daby, sir. I've been posted to your squadron."

"I see. Well, we'll talk about that tomorrow. Go on playing."

For half an hour Biggles sat and listened. Under the influence of the music his aching nerves relaxed and for a little while he forgot the war.

Then the spell was broken. A car pulled up outside, noisily. There came a sound of voices. Then the door was flung open and into the room strode a heavily built young man who carried the slim ring of a pilot officer on his sleeve, and a broad smile on his face. He was followed by another officer whose badges of rank denoted a squadron leader.

Daby stopped playing.

Biggles regarded the pilot officer with an expression which, had the newcomer been less taken up with himself, might have warned him that his noisy entry was unwelcome.

"Where do you suppose you are—at home ? " inquired Biggles coldly.

The youth laughed. "That's a good one," he acknowledged. "I've come over to see Baby."

"And who may that be ? " inquired Biggles.

The youth jerked a thumb in the direction of the pianist. "We called him Baby at the Depot," he explained.

Biggles took a cigarette from his case. "I'm not concerned with what you called him at the Depot, but Pilot Officer Daby happens to have been posted to this squadron, so, in my hearing, at any rate, you'll remember his name. Do you understand ? "

The youth flushed, but before he could reply, his companion stepped forward. "Here, go easy Biggles," he protested.

"Easy nothing, Wilks," returned Biggles curtly. "This is my station, and I like visitors to remember it. Who is this fellow who behaves in a strange mess as though he owns it ? "

"Taggart. He joined my crowd today. Why ? " "I don't like his manners, that's all."

Squadron Leader Wilkinson, known to his friends as Wilks, of number 187

(Hurricane) Squadron, bridled. "Well, I chose him in preference to the man who came to you," he said shortly.

"Meaning Daby ? "

" Yes."

" How so ? "

"They came to Wing Headquarters together. I was there. Naturally, I took the best man."

"What gave you the idea you've got the best man ? " "Well, look at him."

Biggles looked. "What I see doesn't impress me particularly," he said quietly. "I fancy you have made a mistake this time, Wilks."

"I'm willing to bet my man knocks down more enemy aircraft than yours during the next month," offered Wilks.

"I am not a betting man," answered Biggles simply. "I wouldn't bet on that if I was," he added.

"Why not ? "

"Because I don't think it's a nice thing to bet on." "My chaps will laugh when I tell them that."

"No doubt. Most of them have a low sense of humour."

"So you won't take me on ? "

Biggles drew at his cigarette. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said slowly. "If Taggart gets more Huns than Daby within a month from today I'll stand you dinner at any place you like to name. How's that ? "

" Done ! You can start saving up right away." "Okay. Now, if that's all you have to say, push off, because I'm tired."

Wilks laughed and made for the door. "I'll keep you posted as to the number of Huns Taggart gets."

Biggles nodded. "You may not need a fountain pen to do that. So long."

As the door closed behind the visitors Biggles turned to Daby with an encouraging smile.

"You heard that ? It means you've got to get cracking my lad, or this little interlude will spoil my bank account."

" But I—"

"Don't let's talk about it now," protested Biggles. "Go on playing."

Three days later Biggles sat on a chock near the workshop and watched the evolutions of a Spitfire on the far side of the aerodrome with a critical eye. To a civilian the performance would soon have become boring, for the Spitfire did no more than dive, zoom, turn, and then dive again. At the bottom of each dive the vicious snarling of multiple machine guns could be heard.

Biggles glanced aside as Algy Lacey walked past on his way to his machine.

"He's flying well, that boy," remarked Algy. "He's still a trifle slow on left hand turns, but he'll get over that," replied Biggles.

Presently the Spitfire departed from its usual routine. Instead of zooming it turned low and glided in to a neat landing. An airman who had been watching ran across the airfield and presently returned carrying an empty petrol can. By the time he had handed it to Biggles, Daby had parked his machine and was walking towards him.

"How many ? " he asked as he came up.

"Not so good," returned Biggles. "Only seven." He recounted the bullet holes in the can to make sure. "You got ten yesterday. How many rounds did you fire ? "

"Ten bursts of about ten rounds each."

Biggles nodded. "Not too bad. I've seen worse. A petrol can is a small mark. If you can hit that you can hit anything." He glanced up to where a Hurricane was skimming in to a clever, cross-wind landing. "That's Squadron Leader Wilkinson," he observed. "He seems to be in a hurry.

Never let me see you make a landing like that. There's no sense in taking risks when there's no reason for them. What does he want, I wonder ? "

The Hurricane taxied up, and the pilot beckoned without getting out of his machine.

"Hello, Wilks, what's the news ? "inquired Biggles.

"I thought you might like to know that Taggart got his first Messerschmitt this morning, over Calais." "That's fine."

"When's Daby going to start scoring ? "

"When I let him loose."

"What, hasn't he been over the Channel yet ? " "Not yet. He wasn't quite ready."

" Taggart's going over twice a day. I call that pretty good."

Biggles shook his head. "I call it silly. I don't send my lambs to slaughter."

Wilks frowned. "Neither do I," he protested. "But I can't keep the young blighter in. He's as keen as mustard. The trouble with you is, Biggles, you're getting nervous."

Biggles ignored the last remark. "How did Taggart get his Hun ? "

"Stalked him."

"Where were you ? "

"Hanging around."

"He knew that ? "

"Yes, but I give you my word I didn't help him."

"You needn't tell me that, Wilks," said Biggles quietly. "I know you'll play the game. All the same, that lad of yours was getting some confidence from knowing you were handy."

"He can take care of himself," asserted Wilks, turning away.

Biggles nodded. "I hope you're right. See you later."

With a roar the Hurricane swept into the air. Biggles watched it for a

moment, then turned to his pupil. "How much flying time have you logged since you came here ? "

"About eighteen hours."

"All target practise ? "

"Mostly. I've done a fair bit with the camera-gun, too, practising on our own machines, and some Hurricanes, as you suggested."

"Any hits ? "

"Yes, several."

"Good. I'll have a look at your shots sometime. Well, it's a fine day.

Let's have a dekko at the Channel and see what's about. You stick close to my tail."

" Yes, sir." "Okay, let's go."

Side by side the two Spitfires took off, and climbing steeply headed out over the drab grey belt of water that had halted Hitler's army. As they neared the coast of France, black, oily globules of smoke began to blossom around them ; but Biggles did not alter his course, hoping by his disregard to convey to his pupil his contempt of anti-aircraft batteries.

Turning west, for a mile or two the machines flew on, Biggles searching the air for other aircraft. For a little while the sky appeared to be deserted ; but then something caught his eye and he turned towards it.

Far away, over the French coast, what appeared to be a cloud of midges turned and twisted against the blue dome of the sky. It was, he knew, a dogfight in progress, and he hastened towards it ; but long

before he reached the spot the combat had been broken off, and all that remained were odd machines fading into the horizon. Glancing behind to confirm that Dab y was still with him, he stiffened, suddenly. He was alone.

He was round in a flash, craning his neck to see what had become of his companion.

Then his practised eye picked him out, well below, and apparently racing nose down for the English coast. He started after him, but did not overtake him because he turned to watch another dogfight in the distance, between some Hurricanes and Messerschmitt 109's. He saw one of the Messerschmitts fall into the sea ; then the fight broke up, so he went on home.

Daby was standing by his machine when he landed. Jumping down Biggles walked over to him. "What's the idea ? " he asked curtly.

"What do you mean, sir ? " asked Daby.

"Why did you beat it for home as soon as I headed for that scramble ? "

A pink flush appeared on Daby's cheeks. "Do you think I ran away ? "

" It looked mighty like it, didn't it ? "

Daby drew a deep breath. "Yes, I suppose it did." And with that he turned away and strode towards the mess.

Biggles watched him go, and then turned to where some airmen were examining Daby's machine. He heard one of them say : " Stewth ! What a wallop. He nearly had it."

"What's a wallop ? "inquired Biggles, going nearer.

"This hole, sir," replied the airman. "Flak, I reckon. He was lucky the

machine didn't catch fire. The floor's fair swimmin' with petrol."

Biggles looked, and started as his eyes fell on a big jagged hole just aft of the cockpit.

Then he turned and ran after Daby. "I've just seen why you made for home," he said apologetically. "Why didn't you tell me ? "

"I hate making excuses, sir," returned Daby stiffly.

"Well, at least you had a good one," said Biggles grimly as they walked on to the squadron office.

A message lay on Biggles' desk. He read it, and there was a curious expression on his face as he turned to Daby. "I've a signal here from Squadron Leader Wilkinson," he told him. "Taggart has just got another Hun. It must have been the one I saw go down as I was coming home. Don't let that worry you, though, your turn will come."

By the end of a fortnight Taggart had increased his score to three enemy aircraft shot down, and his name was being mentioned as a pilot of promise. On the other hand, Daby, far from scoring a victory, had not yet fired a shot at a hostile machine. He had been over France several times with the squadron on routine sweeps, but it so happened that no enemy aircraft had been encountered. Apart from that, he had spent so much time at camera-gun work that Biggles had more than once been ragged by members of the Hurricane squadron about his backward pupil.

After the last occasion on which this happened Biggles took Daby by the arm. "Listen, laddie," he said quietly, "you'll soon have to be doing something about it."

Daby nodded. "I'm afraid I'm letting you down," he said miserably.

"I'm not worried about that," Biggles told him quickly. "These fellows in 187 Squadron don't understand. They're some of the best chaps in

the world, but the only thing that counts with them is an ability to shoot down enemy aircraft. Of course, when you get down to brass tacks, they're right. That's what we're all here for. You ought to be all right over the other side alone, now, but suppose we go together this afternoon to see what we can find ? "

"But you've just done a patrol, sir," protested Daby. "I don't see why you should give up your free time to help me."

"Never mind about that," returned Biggles. "We'll go off after lunch."

"Thank you, sir," said Daby. "I'll go and have a look at my machine."

Five minutes later Biggles glanced up from his desk as a Spitfire took off and headed south. He sprang to his feet. " Algy ! " he cried, to Algy Lacey, who was there. "Is that a K on the nose of that machine ? "

"It is," confirmed Algy.

"Then it must be Daby going off on his own," rasped Biggles, and made for the door.

"What are you going to do ? " asked Algy.

"I'm going after him," rapped out Biggles. "I know the mood he's in.

He'll know the mood I'm in, too, when I get him on the ground—pushing off by himself without orders."

"I'll come with you," decided Algy.

In a few minutes the two Spitfires were in the air, flying in the direction taken by the lone machine. Not until they were over the French coast did Biggles see it, still a long way ahead and still heading deeper into France.

Biggles' face set in hard lines, for already they were in an area to be avoided except by very strong patrols. But he held on his course, determined to see the business through. He did not have to go far.

Suddenly, ahead, out of the blue a big formation of Messerschmitt 109's streamed down behind the lone Spitfire.

Biggles knew there was nothing he could do. To go on in such circumstances would merely be to throw his life away uselessly—to say nothing of Algy, who would, he knew, stay with him. Only a miracle could save Daby now. Apparently this was not to be, for out of the cluster of now circling machines fell a Spitfire, trailing a long feather of black smoke behind it.

"There he goes," muttered Biggles grimly. Sick at heart he turned for home.

"You can take Daby's name off the roster," he told Tyler, the Adjutant, half an hour later when he walked into his office.

"Are you sure ? " questioned Tyler.

"No doubt about it," retorted Biggles gloomily. "He ran into a mob of Messerschmitts.

He must have been out of his mind. I saw him go down. Well, it's no use brooding over it, I suppose."

"There's a signal for you from Group," said the Adjutant. "The old man wants to see you."

"Okay. Get me a car," ordered Biggles. "The boys can go to the flicks tonight if they want to."

It was nearly midnight when Biggles returned. He was walking towards his quarters, but stopped suddenly as though the night air came the plaintive melody of a Chopin study.

He knew only one man who could play like that. Turning on his heel he ran to the ante-room. Sitting at the piano was Daby.

"What are you doing here ? " snapped Biggles, "How did you get home ? "

Daby sprang to his feet. "Frankly, I'm not quite sure, sir," he admitted.

"I'm afraid my machine is pretty badly shot up. I had to put it down near Dover and leave it there."

"But I thought I saw a machine going down in flames ? "

"You did, sir, but I wasn't in it."

"I don't understand. Do you mean you got a Hun ? "

"I got three, sir, to be precise. I think I forced another to land, but I'm not sure."

Biggles' face was stern. "Really, I ought to put you under arrest. What made you go off without me ? —and why choose a place where the sky is stiff with Huns ? "

"I had a reason, sir," stated Daby simply. "I didn't tell you because I thought it would annoy you, but Taggart rang me up this morning and invited me to go to Amiens with him to see him put down some Messerschmitts. I could hardly refuse. I felt that the honour of the squadron was at stake, as well as my own. I could see him in front of me all the way."

Biggles stared. "Was his the machine I saw go down ? "

" Yes, sir."

At this moment into the room strode Squadron Leader Wilkinson. "

Taggart's had it," he announced grimly.

"I know," said Biggles.

"How do you know ? "

"I saw him go down."

"You were there ? Then it must have been you who shot down those three Messers. I had a sweep on, and some of my boys saw the whole thing."

"No, I didn't shoot down the Messers," said Biggles quietly. "It was Daby."

Squadron Leader Wilkinson stared. "What were you doing, letting Daby go over alone, after criticising me for letting Taggart go ? "

"As a matter of fact," said Biggles slowly, " Daby went without my permission. But at least he was fit to go."

"I don't believe it."

"I can prove it."

" How ? "

Biggles took an envelope from his pocket, and from it produced a small square photograph such as is taken by a camera-gun. He held it up. In the centre was a Hurricane. " Daby took that photograph," he said. "The pilot of the Hurricane knew nothing about it. I think you will agree that if Daby had been a Hun the pilot of that Hurricane would never have known what killed him."

"Who was in the Hurricane ? "

"Taggart."

"But Taggart was only a beginner," protested Wilkinson. Daby would never have pulled off a shot like that if the Hurricane pilot had been an old hand."

Biggles smiled faintly and took out a second photograph. "This also is a direct hit," he said quietly, Another Hurricane. Again the pilot didn't suspect he was being shot at—

although he was an old hand."

Wilkinson almost snatched the photograph. His lips parted in horror and surprise. "I know that machine," he stammered.

"You ought to," Biggles told him grimly. "You were flying it. You'll agree, I think, that if Daby was able to score a hit on a pilot of your experience, without you knowing anything about it, he hasn't been wasting his time."

Wilks bit his lip. "I can see I shall have to watch my step," he said sadly.

Document Outline

01 plain Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Page 7

Page 8

Page 9

Page 10

Page 11

Page 12

Page 13

Page 14

Page 15

Page 16

Page 17

Page 18

Page 19

Page 20

Page 21

Page 22

Page 23

Page 24

Page 25

02 plain Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Page 7

Page 8

Page 9

Page 10

Page 11

Page 12

Page 13

Page 14

Page 15

Page 16

Page 17

Page 18

Page 19

Page 20

Page 21

Page 22

Page 23

Page 24

Page 25

Page 26

Page 27

Page 28

Page 29

Page 30

Page 31

Page 32

Page 33

Page 34

Page 35

Page 36

Page 37

Page 38

Page 39

Page 40

Page 41

Page 42

Page 43

Page 44

Page 45

Page 46

Page 47

Page 48

Page 49

Page 50

Page 51

Page 52

Page 53

Page 54

Page 55

Page 56

Page 57

Page 58

Page 59

Page 60

Page 61

Page 62

*Any space
Any time*



ACE TRUCKING CO.

ANOTHER SCAN BROUGHT TO YOU BY ACE GARP
(Isitanywonder)